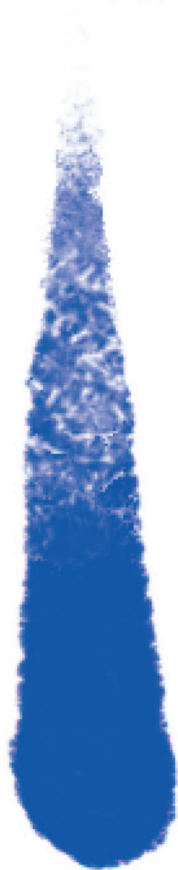


Foreword by Christophe Jaffrelot

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SURYAKANT WAGHMORE



# Civility against Caste

Dalit Politics and Citizenship  
in Western India



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DALIT POLITICS AND  
CITIZENSHIP IN WESTERN  
INDIA

Suryakant Waghmore



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*Dedicated to  
Dalit Struggles for Civility in India*

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## List of Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| BAMCEF  | Bahujan and Minority Community Employees Federation |
| BBM     | Bahujan Bharipa Mahasangh                           |
| BJP     | Bhartiya Janta Party                                |
| BMP     | Bahujan Majoor Paksha                               |
| BPL     | Below Poverty Line                                  |
| BSP     | Bahujan Samaj Party                                 |
| CBI     | Central Bureau of Investigation                     |
| CM      | Chief Minister                                      |
| CPI     | Communist Party of India                            |
| CPI (M) | Communist Party of India (Marxist)                  |
| DS4     | Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti                |
| FIR     | First Information Report                            |
| GoM     | Government of Maharashtra                           |
| GP      | Gram Panchayat                                      |
| I/NGO   | International/Non-governmental Organisation         |
| MLA     | Member of Legislative Assembly                      |
| MHA     | Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan                                |
| MLC     | Member of Legislative Council                       |
| MP      | Member of Parliament                                |
| NCP     | Nationalist Congress Party                          |
| NT      | Nomadic Tribes                                      |
| OBC     | Other Backward Classes                              |
| PCR     | Protection of Civil Rights                          |
| PM      | Prime Minister                                      |
| PWPI    | Peasants and Workers Party of India                 |
| RDC     | Rural Development Centre                            |

**x Civility against Caste**

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| RPI             | Republican Party of India   |
| SC              | Scheduled Castes  |
| SC/ST (PoA) Act | Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes<br>Prevention of Atrocities Act |
| SS              | Shiv Sena   |
| ST              | Scheduled Tribes  |
| ZP              | Zilla Parishad  |

## Foreword

India is witnessing a paradox of continued caste violence against Dalits and the liberal urge to make caste invisible in public spaces (refer to the July 2013 judgement of Allahabad High Court on banning caste rallies). Caste politics of those at the margins may therefore need to be studied carefully for theorising social change and justice in India. Suryakant Waghmore's *Civility against Caste* is a bold attempt in this direction.

Most of the books on Dalit politics in Maharashtra concentrate on the Mahars and the Republican Party of India (RPI).<sup>1</sup> Till recently, this focus made sense since the Mahars were the avant-garde of the Ambedkarite movement. Babasaheb Ambedkar, himself, could never attract non-Mahar Dalits in large numbers when he initiated political parties, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Scheduled Castes Federation and then the RPI. Some Chambhars rallied around him, including, briefly, Bapusaheb Rajbhoj who joined the SCF in 1942 but became a congressman after the demise of B.R. Ambedkar.<sup>2</sup> Mangs, who were poorer than

<sup>1</sup> The list of the 'classics' is long, starting with the pioneering work of E. Zelliot (published many years after her first research in the 1960s), *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992). See also, in chronological order: A. Robertson, *The Mahar Folk* (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1938); J.M. Mahar, ed., *The Untouchables in Contemporary India* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1972); G. Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India* (Pune: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976); M.S. Gore, *Non-Brahman Movement in Maharashtra* (New Delhi: Segment Books, 1989); J. Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993); G. Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi, SAGE Publications, 1994) and T. Pillai-Vetschera, *The Mahars* (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>M. Gautam, *Bapusaheb Rajbhoj* (Aligarh: Siddhartha Gautam Sikshan and Sanskriti Samiti, 1995 [Hindi]).

Mahars, were even fewer in Ambedkar's party (only one candidate of the ILP came from their ranks in 1937). This book about Dalit politics covers Mahar and non-Mahar mobilisation and their role in Maharashtra politics, with special references to the district of Beed. It unravels the political routine of a new party, the Bahujan Samaj Party. BSP, though Mahar-dominated in Maharashtra, has substantial support from non-Mahar Dalits. The second grass-roots movement studied is Manavi Hakk Abhiyan, which is an Ambedkarite-Mang organisation with NGO repertoires to its politics. All this is new and this post-'90s phenomenon Waghmore suggests is Dalit politics beyond 'impassé'.

But Suryakant Waghmore's book is not only worth reading because of the new material that it makes available to the public, and that I've been privileged to discover two years ago as the external examiner of his PhD. It offers also an in-depth ethnography of Dalit life at the local level, including violence against Dalits—something quantitative surveys cannot capture. It not only meticulously scrutinises the inner divisions among the Dalits, but also shows social change through Dalit efforts of forming contestatory collective identities from below.

More importantly, Waghmore makes a very substantial argument. He suggests that democracy has preceded struggles for civility in India. When it comes to Dalit citizenship, India has a peculiar context of *high democracy and low civility*. Posing a challenge to postcolonialist scholarship and normative liberal prescriptions, he argues that civil society may be based on ascriptive groups and, therefore, that Dalit emancipation may rely on caste in order to fight the caste *system* more effectively. He assumes that Dalit identity shaped according to *Ambedkarite* categories provides the ex-untouchables with an alternative repertoire and pride.

Indeed, Dalits may develop a sense of collective belonging out of the caste system by evolving a Dalit culture based on Buddhism and/or a common social consciousness as well as references (like a proper literature, poetry and theatre). This ethnicisation of caste was a key element of B.R. Ambedkar's sociology—be the Dalit identity equated with Buddhism or rooted in some autochthonous claim making the Dalits the 'sons of the soil' at the expense of the upper caste 'Aryan invaders'. While this process has been observed before in the case of the Mahars,<sup>3</sup> Waghmore is the first scholar to make this point in the case of the Mangs.

<sup>3</sup>C. Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005; London: Hurst & Company, 2005; New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

Civility against Caste provides valuable insights to present-day Dalit politics. It gives us a nuanced ethnography of Dalit struggles against routinised caste violence, land inequalities, Dalit engagement with state for justice and strategic state repression that Dalits face. The making of Ambedkarite collective identities from below along with assertive Dalit politics in public spaces fundamentally alter the idea of Dalit subjects and the standards of tolerance and civility in caste society, suggests Waghmore.

Dalit autonomous politics however faces the challenge of assimilation in electoral fields. Dalit movements lay themselves to the divide and rule strategies of other elites by being co-opted, as is evident from the career and divisions of the RPI. Waghmore's study of 2009 elections and Dalits in this book presents the challenges of co-option that Dalits face and points to the continued relevance of non-party spaces in Dalit struggles for autonomy and full citizenship.

Overall, Waghmore's brilliant ethnography and theoretical engagement is a critical intervention in the study of caste, civility and civil society in postcolonial India.

31 July 2013

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## Introduction

One afternoon in December 2008, I was with Chanderlal Banage at his small cobbler shack in Majalgaon Town of Beed District in Maharashtra. Banage is from the Chambar<sup>1</sup> caste (ex-untouchable caste<sup>2</sup>) and we were discussing an incident of caste discrimination that he had faced early in his life. Banage worked on a shoe as we conversed. Two men came on a motorbike and the one riding the bike asked Banage about the owner of the closed shack next to Banage's shop. Banage informed him that the owner was out of town and may come tomorrow. Then he continued working and talking to me. Banage's reply, however, did not seem sufficient for the man. With some authority he asked Banage again, 'Where has he gone? When will he come?' Banage this time stopped the work at hand and politely provided details about a crisis in the neighbouring shop owner's family. He also added that the shop owner will return in two days for sure. After this the man rode off. I asked Banage if he was from the Maratha caste, the dominant caste in Maharashtra. Banage smiled, acknowledging that my guess was right, and added, 'They think they are big (*mote*).'

The man did not refer to Banage by his name, nor did he use any of the usual etiquettes of courtesy or respect used in Marathi, and he carried a sense of authority in his speech, so I took a guess at his caste, which

<sup>1</sup>Chambars/Charmakars are numerically the third-most populous caste after the Mahars and Mangs, respectively, in Maharashtra. Charmakars are considered higher in status than the Mahars and Mangs. Charmakar is a relatively new sanskritised variation of Chambar that has come in vogue in last two decades.

<sup>2</sup>The Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra used the term Dalit broadly to include landless labourers and the poor of all castes. The word Dalit, however, is used mostly to refer to the untouchable castes in Indian politics. I use the term Dalit to refer to (ex) untouchables who are identified as Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the Constitution of India, at times, these terms are also used interchangeably.

turned out to be right. My guess was partially influenced by the narratives of activists and participants in Dalit movements who emphasise the dominance of Marathas and continuance of caste-based exclusions in Marathwada. Though aware of the rudeness in the behaviour of the Maratha man, Banage did not get into any argument with him and opted to ignore the disrespect. Banage's silence may be mistaken for docile behaviour, but this does not represent his politics and agency against caste exclusion. Though not from the Mahar caste, which has traditionally dominated Dalit movements and politics in Maharashtra, Banage is part of the Bahujan<sup>3</sup> Samaj Party (BSP) and also works for a social organisation called the Akhil Bhartiya Guru Ravidas Samata Parishad (All India Guru Ravidas Convention for Equality, ABGRSP) that mobilises Chambars in favour of BSP and Ambedkarite ideology. Besides mobilising the opinion of Chambars and other castes in favour of the BSP, Banage also contributes funds to these organisations from his limited earnings. He reads and circulates literature linked to the Bahujan movement and his shack was a site for discussions on party politics during the elections of 2009. Due to such efforts he had even managed to convince a few Marathas to join the BSP.

Banage's actions reflects a kind of deliberative politics in civil society where he convinces Dalits and other castes to join the BSP and its anti-caste ideology in order to bring about social transformation through capturing state power. In contrast to Banage's politics is Bivaji's contentious political engagement. Bivaji is from Tandalwadi village in Beed District and comes from the Mang<sup>4</sup> caste. Though landless, he cultivates *gaairan* land (common grazing land) in Tandalwadi village despite the opposition of members of the local dominant castes and the state authorities. His

<sup>3</sup>*Bahujan* literally means majority and *samaj* can be translated as social group or society. As an ideological construct, *Bahujan* refers to organising the lower castes that constitute a majority into a political community.

<sup>4</sup>Mangs are the second-most numerous SCs in Maharashtra. Mangs are the most deprived amongst the three major SCs. For instance, literacy amongst the Charmakars and Mahars is 74.9 per cent and 74.1 per cent, respectively, whereas amongst the Mangs the figure is 62.2 per cent. Literacy amongst Mang women is the lowest at 48.6 per cent compared to 60 per cent average for all SC women in Maharashtra. Amongst the Mangs, 66.9 per cent continue to reside in rural areas; this is the highest amongst the SCs. Mangs are followed by Mahars at 65.5 per cent. More Mangs are agricultural workers, at around 57.9 per cent followed by Mahars at 48.5 per cent. All figures from [www.censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_sc\\_maha.pdf](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_maha.pdf) (accessed on 13 May 2007).

cultivation of *gaairan* is 'illegal'. A local movement organisation called Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan (Human Rights Campaign, MHA) has played a critical role in raising awareness amongst Dalits, particularly landless Mangs, against caste exclusions and for cultivating grazing land. The MHA has supported Bivaji and other Dalits to cultivate *gaairan* land in the village despite the Marathas threatening Dalits with violence.

The MHA's politics, however, is not all extra-institutional. For instance, it helps Dalits seek legal redress for injustice, like registering complaints with the police against violence they have faced. Grieving Dalits who have faced violence or the threat of violence for violating etiquettes of caste approach activists of MHA based in various villages, or they visit the Rural Development Centre (RDC) office in Telgaon village, Nagpur. The RDC is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) run by Dalit activists since mid-eighties and is part of MHA. The RDC networks with international NGOs and movements in Europe and South America. It also conducts research surveys on *gaairan* cultivations by Dalits and atrocities against Dalits that are used for lobbying with the government.

Bivaji's membership in Dalit politics is not limited to MHA and he participates in rallies of other Dalit sociopolitical organisations too. Sociopolitical organisations such as the Republican Party of India (RPI), BSP and MHA constitute the fragmented but vibrant Dalit politics of protest and resistance in Maharashtra. Despite their marginal location in the civil society, these organisations continue to influence and shape civil society, state and caste in order to assert Dalit concerns of recognition and redistribution. Banage and Bivaji's civic engagement is visible in their participation in BSP and MHA, and marks the simultaneous and intertwined relevance of caste in liberal institutions of the state and civil society in Dalit politics. This book is an anthropological engagement with the critical role of Dalit movements in the making of civility and civil society in India. The politics of Banage, Bivaji and several other Dalit movement activists and participants are explored in this book to chart the complex and conflictual process in the making of society *civil* in India.

## **Studying Civil Society through Caste and Dalit Politics**

Civil society is an ambiguous concept often treated with suspicion in the study of politics in postcolonial societies (Gellner 2009). In one way,

this book further adds to such ambiguity through providing ethnographic details on the haziness of civil society and its daily fusing with caste and state processes. Caste continues to dominate the public sphere in India since colonial governmentality opened up public spaces for political conversations and competitions. The postcolonial modern sovereign states with a 'liberal' constitution and 'socialist' leanings, followed by the neo-liberal state, have hardly reduced the salience of caste in the public life of India.

In capturing the dynamism of caste and civil society, this book supplements previous scholarship on the intersections of caste and modern politics (Rudolph 1965, Kothari and Rushikesh 1965). I emphasise *civility* and *civil society*, however, to elucidate the dynamic and volatile processes of state formation and the particularity of the Dalit question and Dalit aspirations of trust, dignity and equality in public spaces. While I pursue a critique of normative liberal assumptions on the functioning of civil society through the study of caste and Dalit politics, I do not disown the idea and possibility of civil society just because it has occidental origins and liberal morals. Rather, my attempt is to chart the dynamism of caste and Dalit politics and their contribution to the making of democratic civility in India.

The making of civility and civil society involves a marked departure from medieval rudeness and intolerance, a civilised super-ego has to internalise social constraints on the free play of libidinal drives (Freud 1964). The case of continued caste violence and Dalit exclusion illustrates how the morals of democratic civility and tolerance are yet to be achieved in India's public life. I, therefore, explore civil society as a sphere of freedom for competitive political mobilisations which include civilising and de-civilising currents. I investigate the civilising process (Elias 1978) and civility pressures from below in the caste habitus of postcolonial India.

I draw upon the liberal conflation of civility and civil society (Shils 1991, Pye 1999, Seligman 2000 and Hall 1998). Classical liberal thinkers like Adam Smith and David Hume celebrated civility to emphasise the seventeenth century departure from a *rude* state of nature to a tolerant *civil* society (Calhoun 2000). For Adam Smith, the moral sentiments of sympathy and fellow feeling amongst impartial spectators (not kinship ties) reflected a new universalism in civil society that was radically different from exclusivist primordial social ties (Silver 1990). The possibility of reciprocity across social, ethnic and political cleavages is critical to the making of democratic civility (Chambers and Kopstein 2001).

The practice of civility is intimately connected to socially established rules of respect, tolerance and considerateness (Calhoun 2000). The local norms of civility in India under the rules of caste and Hinduism make the project of Dalit citizenship a complex and violent process. Caste as a deeply private realm constructs a form of public in India which is exclusionary and based on status privileges. Indian civilisation stands in contrast to notions of democratic civility and tolerance 'for the brute reason that difference is absolute with the shadow of an untouchable being such as to pollute a member of high castes' (Hall 1998: 37). The social psychology of the Hindu caste system consists of an exclusionary attitude and most alarming aspects of religious intolerance are preferable to it (Bilgrami 2003).

The caste values of intolerance, indignation and violence continue to be performed most sternly against Dalits in public life. The exclusion of Dalits from public spaces continues in India and Dalit politics aimed at democratising public and civil society can, therefore, best be studied through a civil society lens. I emphasise civil society and democratic civility as they hold the promise of equality irrespective of status privileges in public spaces. Civil society is, therefore, an intensely political project. In the study of Dalit politics, civil society brings immense conceptual and political value as the movement from *status* to *contract* for Dalits is still an ongoing one.

Solidarities around caste and other identities continue to define India's political democracy in many ways. A search for civil society in 'open and secular institutions', as suggested by Bêteille (2005: 446), 'is fraught with empirical challenges'. Bêteille's (2005) suspicion of associations formed around kinship and religion in civil society is, however, critical in study of civil society. It can help us distinguish between civil society groups and associations that promote the goals of 'civility' of democracy and the groups and associations that promote almost the opposite—hatred, bigotry and ignorance (Chambers and Kopstein 2001). Bêteille (1999, 2005) helps us raise the most important question in the study of civil society, 'What type of civil society deepens democracy and democratic civility?'

Not all solidarities around social identities and caste contribute to the making of democratic civility and tolerance. This book elaborates how liberal norms of equality in public spaces impinge upon traditional privileges of dominant castes in rural locales. Caste exclusions facing Dalits in rural public spaces are neither polite nor non-violent. Dalits, on the other hand, bear the burden of civility in their quest for justice beyond the traditional propriety of caste. Dalit aspirations of civility

and citizenship, thus, invite frequent retributive violence for challenging boundaries of caste incivilities.

The social and economic exclusions of Dalits and the continued stigma and pollution attached to Dalit identity stand in opposition to how universal citizenship has been conferred in postcolonial India. I conceptualise the sustained exclusion of Dalits as one linked to the paradox of *high democracy and low civility* in Indian politics. In postcolonial India, democracy has preceded civility, civil society and public spaces, thus, continue to be inequalitarian and hierarchical for Dalits.

Democracy in India continues to reproduce caste and untouchability in insidious forms, generating newer modes of Dalit exclusion and, in tandem, a Dalit politics of protest. The present form of postcolonial democracy in India that Chatterjee (2011) celebrates is void of civility and has institutionalised retributive violence against Dalit citizenship claims. Mere democracy does not ensure civility; political communities like those of Dalit movements carve out spaces for tolerance and reciprocity.

Dalit politics in the colonial and postcolonial period achieved several critical sociopolitical changes despite elite dominance. Dalit politics since colonial times has challenged the hierarchic elements of caste in public life, thus, giving a republican turn to private property inspired civil society. Dalit assertion and politics marks a departure of Dalits from their untouchable pasts and is linked to Dalit aspirations of achieving a genuine civil society and civility.

This book illustrates how Dalit politics radically alters the local standards of civility and civil society in India. In the desert of mass politics which remains indifferent and tolerant to caste inequalities and untouchability, Dalit movements are oases of civic engagement and democratic civility. The Dalit movements I am looking at are not always brilliant on gender issues or even intra-caste concerns. They, however, provide scope for civic engagement with caste issues and democratic civility. As opposed to elite suspicion of state and Constitution, Dalit subjects are cautious of caste Hindu norms that influence mass democracy and sustain Dalit exclusion. Dalit politics contributes to reconstructing civil society by exposing and challenging its exclusionary character. It causes a stir in the moral order of India's elite civil society by making public the everyday forms of violence and exclusions Dalits face.

In pursuing an anthropology of Dalit politics, this book moves beyond the normative and instrumentalist analyses of some liberal (Chibber 1999, Bêteille 2005) and Marxist (Chandhoke 1995) scholars, who tend to deny social identities any emancipatory role in the making of civil society. Caste, far from losing its tenacity (Bêteille 2012), continues

to play an important part in the realm of civil society. My analysis of caste and civil society contributes to Eriksen's (2005) ideas on globalisation and identity politics. The unifying forces of globalisation and the fragmenting forces of identity politics are two complimentary tendencies of the present global scene.

Besides contesting the assumption of Dalit movements having reached an impasse under globalisation (Shah 2001), this book engages with the substantive politics of Dalits to address some of the central questions linked to politics and possibilities of civil society and civility in India. What happens to caste hierarchies in their interaction with civil society processes and politics? Is caste antithetical to the possibilities of civility? Why and how do Dalit movements make use of caste repertoires in their present form? What role does the Dalit form of caste politics play in making of publics and public spaces? Why do Dalits face violence in aspirations of citizenship? Why does state remain central to Dalit politics? How is Dalit participation in electoral politics related to civil society processes? Are Dalit movements de-politicised due to International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs)? In addressing these questions, I make a case for moving beyond mere (re)reading of Dr Ambedkar's liberal scholarship, to study present-day Dalit politics and the challenges Dalits face in practicing 'Ambedkarism'.

Based on ethnographic account of Dalit politics in Marathwada region of Maharashtra, this book transcends normative readings of civil society to study it as an intensely political process. I argue that caste, civil society and state intersect and co-evolve in postcolonial times, where Dalit citizenship aspirations play a critical role in stretching democratic imagination of rural dominants. Caste, civil society and state are, thus, not rigid structures and possibility of civility can coexist with political vitality of caste. In suggesting that caste, state and civil society are fragmented processes that shape the dynamic fields of power relations, this book moves beyond the dichotomies of local against global, state against civil society and more importantly caste against civil society.

## **Anthropology of Dalit Politics—Following BSP and MHA in Marathwada**

In the study of the Indian polity, the debate on what is civil society appears to be far from innocent. The movements and associations of castes—of lower castes in particular—are generally seen as antithetical



to civil society. I argue that civil society in postcolonial politics is not limited to elite etiquettes and associational forms (between state and household). I emphasise the need to study civil society in its local forms, particularly caste associations and politics of those at the margins, to pursue what Hann (1996) terms ‘civil’ anthropology—one that accords equal respect to alternative moralities. Contrary to the scholarship that attributes civil society to elites, I explore democratisation through Dalit politics and its role in the making of civility and civil society.

This book contributes to the anthropology of politics in general and Dalit politics in particular. It is an ethnographic<sup>5</sup> exploration of the post-Dalit Panther phase of Dalit politics in Marathwada. The focus is on two sociopolitical organisations identified as critical cases: one is MHA, a grassroots Dalit movement with international networks; and the other is the BSP, a national Dalit political party with considerable presence in the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions of Maharashtra. Dalit organisations like MHA and BSP are engaged in creating spaces for the articulation of alternatives to the dominant public sphere and democratic processes. BSP and MHA in Marathwada help sustain the political and ideological struggles against the inequities of caste in different ways. This study of their functioning and relational contexts analyses the intersections of caste, anti-caste ideology, politics and the political culture that (re)locates Dalits to the margins and also the Dalit struggle to reform state and caste, to gain recognition and self-respect for Dalits.

Studies in the past have productively used a similar approach in exploring Dalit politics (Khare 1985, Gorringer 2005, Jaoul 2006, 2008 and Hardtmann 2009). A recent addition to the scholarship on Dalit politics is Rao (2009), who uses historical anthropology as a critical strategy to unravel the paradoxical centrality of ‘Dalits’ to Indian democracy. I am concerned more with the daily working of Dalit movements, their fractured forms, relational contexts and role in making civil society possible. Through a thick description of everyday participation in Dalit politics, this book counters the popular image of Dalit movements as coherent, well-bounded entities and produces evidence on fragmentation along caste and ideological lines and competition and cooperation within Dalit politics.

<sup>5</sup>The preliminary fieldwork was carried in May 2007, followed by fieldwork between August 2008 and June 2009; and later briefly in January–February 2010. Besides field notes based on my participation in the movements, I also conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Names of some villages and individuals have been anonymised or are pseudonyms in this book.

In transcending dichotomies of caste versus civil society and civil society versus state, this book elaborates upon non-class issues like identity and culture and their interface with class structures in Dalit politics.

Pursuing the anthropology of Dalit politics helps comprehend the exclusions Dalits face and the fragments of Dalit politics in (g)localised contexts. The blurring of national political and economic boundaries and the expansion of transnational/global civil society organisations in global democratisation processes is seen in the grassroots of Marathwada as well. In the present context of fluid political geographies, multi-sited ethnography serves as a key methodological innovation (Marcus 1995). Depth of ethnographic fieldwork 'lies no longer in staying long enough at one, two or three localities, or travelling between them, but of extensive following in *any* direction of importance' (Hardtmann 2009: 27).

I pursued a multi-sited ethnography to follow the dynamism of Dalit activism wherever it flowed, coupled with regular interactions and staying with participants. Pursuing multi-sited ethnography of Dalit politics has helped me engage with the complex political flows and disjunctures<sup>6</sup> across time and space. My ethnography of the BSP and MHA was multi-sited at three levels, one with the activists/leaders of these movements, second with participants/supporters/volunteers and finally with the networks of movements. I participated and observed the daily socio-economic, cultural and political processes of Dalit mobilisations to examine the centrality of state (political opportunity structures) and caste (inequality and social capital) in the context of Marathwada.

My participation in both MHA and BSP varied from being a photographer, giving career advice to those interested in higher studies, and a sounding board for the activists who shared personal and political problems and criticism of the movement they were a part of. In MHA, at times, I helped as a translator for foreign visitors, edited reports, made power-point presentations and participated in planning some meetings. In BSP, I was seen as researcher who was clearly supportive of its politics. I spent time with the activists, listening and participating in various informal conversations. Though I had planned to be a non-participant observer in formal meetings, I was called on stage by MHA on several occasions and was also asked to address the Kanshiram Jayanti gathering in Beed as chief guest by the BAMCEF (affiliated to BSP).

<sup>6</sup>Appadurai (2000) calls for a shift from study of trait geographies to 'process' geographies map the flows and disjunctures of globalisation and intersections of globalisation from above and below.

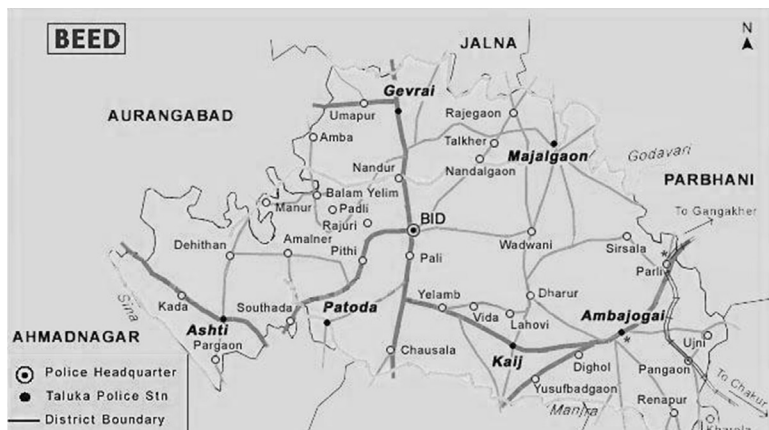
**Map 1:**  
*Map of Maharashtra*



**Source:** Adapted from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maharashtra>.

**Note:** State of Maharashtra (Not to Scale).

**Map 2:**  
*Map of Beed District*



**Source:** Adapted from [www.mahapolice.gov.in](http://www.mahapolice.gov.in).

**Note:** Map of Beed District (Not to Scale).

In multi-sited fieldwork, I changed my identities according to the context, and was what Marcus (1995) calls a ‘circumstantial activist’. I traversed through being a Dalit (Holeya/Mahar from Karnataka), lecturer from Tata Institute, Mumbai, ‘UK’ PhD scholar, an Ambedkarite and a distant observer when situations got conflictual. This helped me engage with both Dalits and non-Dalits to follow nuances of Maratha kingly (referred locally as Raje) claims and politics, INGOs and Dalit movement relations, Dalit compulsions in party politics, use of caste repertoires in Dalit movements and their patriarchal movement structures. Working with non-Dalits and staying constantly in contact with non-activists has also enabled me retain analytical independence.

## The Setting: Marathwada in Maharashtra

The ethnography of Dalit politics presented in this book focuses on Beed District of Marathwada region in Maharashtra (see Maps 1 and 2). Marathwada refers to the geographic areas that were part of the erstwhile Hyderabad state under Nizam rule. Marathwada in present times comprises eight districts and exposes the stark reality of the socio-economic deprivation in Maharashtra, which may be invisible due to development of Mumbai and the western region of the state (Kamdar and Basak 2005).

The semi-feudal culture of caste and the traditional economy were long sustained in Marathwada because of the disinterest of the Nizam administration in developing districts other than Hyderabad (Kate 1987: 86) and due to the unreformed nature of the state of Hyderabad (Guru 1994, Omvedt 1993: 64–66). Under Nizam rule, the land tenure systems gave immense power to big landlords (*Jaagir-dars*) constructing a highly feudal economy and society that survived in the post-Nizam period leaving Dalits as landless labourers and *veth begars* (unpaid labourers compelled to work for village officials and village landlords).

The village economic organisation in Marathwada was structured around caste occupations which existed in the form of Balutedari system. A close variant of Jajmani, Balutedari had Patil (village head man) and Kulkarni (village accountant) who were generally Marathas and Brahmans, respectively. The rigidity of labour and exchange practices under Balutedari has been a matter of debate.<sup>7</sup> For the untouchable castes, however, the

<sup>7</sup>Guha (2004) questions the rigidity of Balutedari (and Jajmani) as understood by Dumont (1980). Fuller (1989) too critiques the understanding of Jajmani or Baluta as a system that survived unchanging in ‘traditional’ India.

traditional exchange schema meant dual disadvantages; firstly, in their labour (and bodies) being framed as stigmatised and secondly, in the exploitative nature of returns offered in kind.

Marathwada continues to be largely an agrarian society and landholdings are highly skewed in favour of dominant castes, particularly the Marathas (Mandavdhare 1989). The political and economic deprivation of this region merged locally with the traditional hierarchies of caste in the postcolonial period. Marathwada still retains some of the semi-feudal elements of a caste-based economic system—like practices of *yeskarki* and *gavaki*<sup>8</sup>—that tied Dalits to traditional polluting occupations not paid for in cash.

My focus is on Beed District which is largely representative of the Dalit<sup>9</sup> situation in rural Maharashtra. Most Dalits in villages still continue to be landless or small and marginal farmers who depend on dominant castes for their livelihood sources. During the ninth Five Year Plan period 25.84 per cent families were Below the Poverty Line (BPL) and SCs constituted 28.63 per cent of the total BPL population in Beed.<sup>10</sup>

In Beed, though, we also encounter increased mobility amongst the labourers, particularly Dalits, who migrate out as sugarcane-cutting workers to cities like Pune and Mumbai seeking seasonal employment. The changing meanings of labour for Dalits also affect the dominant castes like the Marathas both socially and economically. Labour is neither cheap nor easily available especially when the landless Dalits migrate for sugarcane cutting and dominant castes are forced to increase the wages when they are in dire need of labourers. The economic changes though substantial are not permanent for Dalits, a bad drought or shortage of sugarcane can put the sugarcane workers in a debt trap.

<sup>8</sup>*Yeskarki* refers specifically to the cleaning duties attached to the temple and gate keeping in the village that untouchables carried out whereas *gavaki* refers to services rendered to individual Patil families which included a mix of work considered polluting coupled with farm labour.

<sup>9</sup>Of the total population of 2,161,250 in Beed, SCs constitute 281,240 (13.01 per cent). The Mahars, Mangs and Chambars are the three largest SC groups and comprise 95 per cent of SC population in Beed District. In Beed, the Mahars are the largest SC group with a population of 160,215 (56 per cent), followed by Mangs who number 84,100 (29 per cent) and the Chambars number 24,485 (8.7 per cent). Available at [http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Dist\\_File/datasheet-2727.pdf](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Dist_File/datasheet-2727.pdf) (accessed on 22 July 2008).

<sup>10</sup>Available at <http://beed.nic.in/htmldocs/drda.html> (accessed on 28 July 2010). These figures, however, seemed to be an underestimate as Dalits from various villages in Beed contested these figures and maintained that well-to-do farmers made it into the BPL list and landless Dalits were excluded.

Like in rest of Maharashtra, the landholdings in Beed are highly skewed as around 26 per cent cultivators own 58 per cent of total cultivable land (GoM 2008: 5). Marathas are dominant castes who control politics and economy in Beed too. Dalits in Beed though landless are far more mobile in search of employment than they were till the early 1980s. Some Dalits have also ventured into contentious politics of cultivating public/*gaarian* lands.

### ***The Vibrant Democracy and Kingly (Raje) Maratha Power***

While passing through the main roads of Beed City or any other Block head quarter in Beed one easily gets a feel of the vibrancy of democracy and the politicisation of public spaces. Be it the streets or the government offices, banners, hoardings and wall paintings are replaced regularly with new ones informing the citizens of new sociopolitical events. These are all cleared (totally) only during the Achar-sanhita (code of conduct) of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections. Advertised events vary from a mass rally of Hindu Jagruti Sabha (Hindu right-wing organisation) to rallies of various political parties or birthday wishes for local and national leaders.

Similarly, one can see collective performances either in support or in opposition to something. The Beed Zilla Adhikari's (District Collector) office had some groups protesting or fasting most of the time. Some worth mentioning, that depict the political culture, were: Brahmins against cow killings, doctors protesting against an FIR filed by MHA against a doctor for his negligence leading to the death of three children, Dalits protesting caste violence or for regularisation of grazing lands they cultivated, Marathas demanding reservations in government jobs and a small group of Gandhians fasting against corruption.

The politics of protest and civic engagement also includes active participation of people across caste in party politics of Beed. In Beed, party politics is dominated by the Marathas followed by the Vanjaris. Beed has one Lok Sabha and six Vidhan Sabha constituencies—Georai, Majalgaon, Beed, Ashti, Kaij (SC reserved) and Parali.<sup>11</sup> The political

<sup>11</sup>Elections for the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha in Maharashtra were held in April and October of 2009, respectively. During the 2009 elections, Beed had a total of 16.33 lakh voters; Marathas constituted 5.50 lakh, Vanjaris 4.50 lakh, Dalits and Muslims together constituted 4 lakh voters and other voters were around two lakh (LNS 2009).

competition in Beed is a bipolar one between the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Bhartiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena (BJP-SS) combine. The NCP is synonymous with Marathas and BJP with the Vanjaris in Beed.

Caste, money and violence dominate in local dynamics of the elections and elections for local bodies<sup>12</sup> are no less competitive. This is more so due to the increased devolution of development funds to these decentralised bodies of governance. These bodies along with the rural credit cooperative structure are mostly in control of Marathas in Beed followed by Vanjaris in pockets of their stronghold. Caste and state, thus, remain in dynamic interaction affecting both micro and macro political processes in postcolonial India.

Caste has generated flourishing party and non-party associations locally. Modern political parties are a crucial point of articulation between civil society and the state and their exclusion in the study of civil society yields an overtly partial perspective (Khilnani 2001: 31–32). The fractured institutions of state and the NCP are sites of economic and political dominance of Marathas. There are, however, some cultural specificities of Maratha dominance linked to the Kshatriya claims of Marathas.

### ***The 'Raje' [King] in Maratha Dominance***

The dominance of Marathas has particular ritual and social content in Marathwada which distinguishes them from Vanjaris in Beed as dominant castes. The term *Maratha* previously referred to a small social elite that differentiated itself from the mass of the peasants called Kunbi (O'Hanlon 1985). These elite families claimed genealogical links with north Indian Rajput families and Kshatriya status. Overtime, Kunbi (as a lower part of Maratha) was slowly subsumed into the Maratha identity (O'Hanlon 1985). Laine (2003) has specifically suggested that Hindutva and Maratha polemic were not common until recently but were systematically constructed by the writers of the Hindu-Bhakti orientation in the pre-colonial period and later co-opted as a symbol of Maratha pride

<sup>12</sup>The decentralised governance structure in Maharashtra is a three-tier system with Zilla Parishad at District level, Panchayat Samiti at Block/taluka level and *Gram Panchayat* at the village level.

with strong Hindu credentials by Hindutva nationalists like Tilak and Savarkar.

The Marathas are numerically stronger in Marathwada than the average 31 per cent in Maharashtra (Vora 2009). Vanjaris too are a numerically strong in some villages of Beed. Vanjaris in the past have claimed to be a branch of Maratha-Kunbis (Hassan 1920: 627–634). The Vanjaris in the past ate from no one but a Brahman or a Maratha, they ranked themselves with Marathas but Marathas objected to dine with them (Bombay Gazetteer 1885: 429). The repulsion of Marathas to Vanjaris and several other castes lower to them makes them a particular kind of dominant caste in Marathwada.<sup>13</sup>

Emphasis merely on numerical preponderance does not help comprehend caste dominance in varied contexts. The logic of numbers seems irrelevant in the case of Maharashtra, as Mahars are the most numerical caste after Marathas. Dumont (1980: 160) instead notes the homology between the caste of the king and the dominant caste and the reproduction of royal function at the village level by dominant castes. However, ‘the subordination of the political and economic criteria to that of ritual status in Dumont’s model plays down the significance of social change in colonial and contemporary times’ (Madan 1999: 479). The Maratha reproduction of royal function at the village does not mean that Marathas accept the ritual superiority of Brahmins as anticipated by Dumont (1980). Maharashtra has a specific trajectory of Maratha politics that has been anti-Brahmin in the colonial period and anti-Dalit in postcolonial period.

Quigley (2003) particularly emphasises the kingship elements practised in miniature amongst the households of members of dominant castes. This is a key difference between the Vanjaris and the Marathas in Marathwada. The Marathas, as dominant castes at the village level, try to reproduce the royal function of caste in miniature. They valorise their Kshatriya claims and revere Shivaji (the Maratha King) to look down upon Vanjaris who have historically claimed to be equal to the Marathas.

I suggest that Maratha power is based on the homology of political and sexual dominance in their imagined village kingdoms. Caste boundaries and roles, if violated by lower castes, especially Dalits directly threaten the kingly elements of Maratha power in a village context. As I will detail later the Marathas and Vanjaris both indulge in violence against Dalits, however, their political symbolologies are different. The material and cultural bases of Maratha power and their greater past are reproduced and

<sup>13</sup>Vanjaris and the Kunbis are currently identified as OBCs in Maharashtra.



performed in public spaces. Most Marathas in Beed also refer to themselves as *raje* (king). The kingly valour and honour of Marathas comes out in political performances especially when Dalits violate the propriety of caste rules and roles.

In globalised times, exclusionary practices of caste resurface in newer forms. In institutes of higher education, discrimination against Dalit achievers is polite, invisible but at times absolute, such that Dalit/ adivasi students are to commit suicide for their intellectual endeavours (Kumar 2012). The ‘untouchable’, who turned educated and ‘enlightened’ through extraordinary constitutional provisions of representation (reservations) and equality, is rendered, a schizoid self who has to be self-immolated. In rural and semi-urban locales, sustaining the normal practice of caste inequalities seems to be increasingly a burden of dominant castes. Modern principles of trust, equality, individuality and self-determination flow through the dominant castes who try to function as village despot. Dalits are not meek victims, however, and organise around multiple organisations to contest the sociopolitical and ritual dominance of Marathas.

### ***Dalit Politics and Political Violence in Marathwada***

The absence of the non-Brahman (Satyashodhak) movement in Marathwada and repressive monitoring of public spaces by the Nizam government set a specific terrain for Dalit exclusion. Dalit political mobilisation took roots in Marathwada in the mid-1930s under three important leaders from the state of Hyderabad—B.S. Venkatrao, J.H. Subayya and Shyamsunder who aligned with Ambedkar and formed associations like the Depressed Classes Association and Hyderabad Scheduled Caste Federation. Their activism secured some political, economic and educational concessions from the Nizam government for the ex-untouchables till the fall of Nizam state in 1948.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed discussion over their activism in Marathwada, differences and competition amongst these leaders and their alliance with the Nizam against the Indian government, see Gaikwad (1990). The Nizam government in the mid-1940s was positively inclined towards the development of *pasta kaum* (depressed classes). See Kakade (1990: 87–89) some political efforts of Nizam to attract untouchables towards Islam and in supporting Ittehad (Muslim Loyalist Organisation).

In the post-Ambedkar period, factions of RPI consolidated their position in Marathwada. Bhaurao (Dadasaheb) Gaikwad led the mobilisation for land leading to encroachments on *gaairan* lands by Dalits. Conversions to Buddhism also followed after 1956, particularly amongst the Mahars in Marathwada radically raising the population of Buddhists.

Amongst the educational concessions derived from Nizam was the grant for the People's Education Society that turned Aurangabad into a centre for Dalit activist-intellectual pursuits. Gokhale (1986) terms these educational institutions in Aurangabad, such as Milind College,<sup>16</sup> as Buddhist institutions. Milind College was the centre of political conscientisation for Dalit students from its inception, a site for Dalit Panthers (DPs) activism during its heydays and also a political space where much mobilisation for the contentious Namantar (name change) movement took place.

The movement for Namantar is a critical event in the history of Dalit assertion in Marathwada and evokes memories of large-scale political violence against Dalits. It refers to the Dalit demand for Namantar of the Marathwada University to Dr Ambedkar University. Various scholars have analysed the violence associated with Marathwada University and have brought out the interplay of caste, class, religion and state in the sustained violence against Dalits (Abraham 1978, Guru 1994, Omvedt 1979, Punalekar 1989 and Gupta 1979). Namantar mobilisation and political violence lasted for fifteen years (1979–1994) costing Dalits, especially the Mahars, loss of lives and property as the upper castes, mostly Marathas, attacked Dalits in the villages. The DPs mobilised for Namantar and against the ensuing violence in Marathwada particularly in small towns and cities.

Shiv Sena overtly opposed Namantar along with religious conversions of Mahars, critique of Hindu religion by DPs, caste-based reservations and the special acts in the Constitution that prohibited violence against Dalits. Members of SS (mostly Marathas) launched campaigns to reclaim grazing land that Dalits had encroached for cultivation under various movements. Dalits (mostly Mahars) and Muslims were targeted (particularly) and lower OBCs (Malis and Vanjaris) were mobilised along with Maratha youth to save the pride of Maharashtra (Lele 1995 and Palshikar 2004). *Jai Shivaji Jai Bhavani* (Hail Shivaji Hail Bhavani), *Shivaji Maharaj ki Jai* (Victory to Shivaji) were the slogans of Marathas attacking rural Dalits, turning the Namantar struggle into a war between Shivaji (Kshatriya king) and Ambedkar (untouchable icon of pride) resulting in large-scale desecration of Ambedkar symbols.

Marathwada also represents a peculiar context within Maharashtra where the socio-economic changes have been slow and the vertical mobility of social groups has sustained the domination of Marathas leaving not just Dalits but also other non-Maratha castes at the margins of local politics. The changes in labour practices and rise in labour mobility have partially undone the traditional labour exchange that stigmatised Dalit bodies. Dalits, however, continue to face new humiliations and political vulnerabilities that deny them full citizenship.

In this study of Dalit politics and civil society, I therefore reject structured understandings, as they can underplay the element of power and the exclusionary character of civil society and public sphere (Flyvbjerg 1998). They may ignore the bad civil society within civil society (Chambers and Kopstein 2001), and the significance of non-bourgeois public spheres and counterpublics (Kellner 2000, Bhandari 2006 and Fraser 1985, 1992) in making possible democratic civility and civil society. Counterpublics do not refer to particular places, persons or topics (Asen 2000), but set themselves against wider publics and their impact on wider society needs to be explored.

Dalit movements and politics do not merely communicate within themselves, they also help to cause changes in the state and society at large. In taking forward the study of caste exclusions facing Dalits and Dalit movements in contemporary times, this book demonstrates the evident stir between the extraordinary principles of citizenship laid out in the postcolonial constitution of India and the ordinary cultural practice of caste exclusion which necessitates Dalits as docile and polluted bodies. Continued political violence against Dalits and Dalit symbols of pride has, however, not tamed Dalit movements.

My study trails anthropological approaches like that of Scott (1985) to explore the politics of the governed (Chatterjee 2004) and to understand the small revolutions that may be happening daily. The sociopolitical struggles and strategies of Dalit movement politics are explored in the following chapters.

Chapter One is an engagement with the intersections of caste and civil society in India. Here, I dwell upon this interface and elaborate the processes through which caste and caste inequalities have been politicised and the rise of Dalit politics in western India. Such politicisation, competition and conflicts were not accidental: they reflected the suppressed political aspirations of citizenship and civil society amongst Dalits. Civil society, I argue, serves as a key concept in the study of Dalit politics as it is a critical space of political freedom and self-realisation which can

reform, politicise and civilise caste relations. Moving beyond a focus on the impact of colonial and postcolonial governmentality in disaggregating and disciplining society, I elaborate on Dalit politics that influenced the evolving civil society and the colonial and postcolonial state. I make a case for the study of Dalit politics for civility under globalisation and amongst the globalised grassroots.

In Chapter Two, I present post-Ambedkar Dalit politics in Maharashtra to highlight its rise and Ambedkarisation, despite the factionalism that has characterised its recent history. The centrality of the state and the reliance on democratic/electoral politics continued in this post-Ambedkar phase. While in the sociocultural and literary fields Dalit politics continued to grow, it faced fragmentation in party politics with politically ambitious leaders forming various factions. It is in this context that I situate the growth of the BSP in Maharashtra as a formidable Dalit party, and also the mobilisation of MHA as a grassroots Dalit movement which utilised the new associational form of NGOs. I argue that the growth of Dalit politics in Marathwada represents a continuum of their marginal locations. This is coupled, however, with increased politicisation and sociopolitical struggles, and it is these struggles that are charted in the following chapters.

Chapter Three engages with caste dynamism and the issues of caste violence against Dalits. The increased violence against Dalits in rural locales is a product of Dalit assertion in public spaces, an assertion which challenges traditional authority embedded in caste hierarchies that dominate public spaces. Dalit assertion and mobility threaten the *raje-shahi* (king-ly) control of dominant castes particularly Marathas. Through ethnographic details, I elaborate the changing meanings of Dalit labour, Dalit assertion in public spaces, the violence that accrues against Dalits and their engagement with state institutions and legal measures. Dalit politics and empowerment in public spaces, I argue, needs to be studied not merely through consensus and deliberations in the public sphere but also through retributive violence that Dalits face and non-retributive politics that Dalits engage in. Dalit politics constrains incivilities of caste and contributes to stretching the democratic imaginations of society in general and the dominant caste in particular.

In Chapter Four, I present the land rights activism by Dalit movements, which has a long history in Marathwada. This chapter also offers a theoretical engagement with the forms of civil society under globalisation. The case of MHA's mobilisation for land rights with international support is critically analysed in order to engage with the debates on

changing spaces and forms of civil society under globalisation and their impact on Dalit movements. Land rights mobilisation by MHA in Marathwada illustrates the intersections of recognition and redistribution in Dalit politics. The NGOs, I argue, are ‘new associations’ in Dalit politics and do not necessarily lead to depoliticisation of Dalit movements. In the context of Marathwada where fragmented institutions of the state are also active forces of Dalit marginalisation, international networks serve as a resource for local Dalit political claims.

While Dalit movements and organisations come together when Dalits are faced with extreme crises and political violence, the realities of caste divisions within Dalits run deep and affect the formation of a united Dalit ideology and identities of protest. Chapters Five and Six develop processual understandings of collective identity formation in Dalit politics. The chapter explores intersections between caste identities and cultural repertoires in anti-caste politics that Dalit movements claim to practice. The formation of collective identities in Dalit movements and their role in building trust and reciprocity across castes is explored.

In Chapter Six, the case of the BSP details mobilisation and formation of a political community beyond ex-untouchable castes. The cultural material BSP activists use attempts to manufacture tolerance of Dalits as equals and as political leaders amongst non-Dalits. On the other hand, caste identity and history is used as an identity of pride and not of stigma for mobilising Dalits. In forming the ‘Bahujan’ collective from below Dalits play the role of leaders and facilitators for electoral politics. The BSP makes selective and strategic use of the fragmented anti-caste culture and history, making democracy and democratisation a cultural project that encompasses issues of both recognition and redistribution.

Chapter Seven presents the case of MHA, and the play of Mang identity and its intersections with the *swabhimani* (self-respecting) Mang identity that MHA seeks to construct. I argue here that jati, though a resource for political mobilisation is not an absolute social category. Mobilisation of jati into a political community is a dynamic process shaped in the relational contexts of movements and may lead to multiple collective identities and outcomes. The case of MHA illustrates the performance, politics and limitations of the particularistic Mang identity and its engagement with the evolution of an alternative politicised *swabhimani* Mang identity.

Electoral politics forms a key constituent in altering standards of civility and tolerance in democratic societies. Chapter Eight contextualises the challenges of practising Ambedkarite politics that BSP and MHA

attempt to pursue in rural Marathwada, where the expanding rural state consolidates patronage politics and the control of dominant castes over the state. The MHA and BSP's electoral strategies and challenges are analysed through their participation in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections of 2009. MHA's engagement in grassroots electoral politics provides insights into the absolute control of dominant castes on state institutions and the resulting Dalit exclusion from their entitlements. Dalit political mobilisation to autonomously represent their own interests is pushed into narrow lanes of jati politics where MHA comes to represent only Mang interests. The BSP, though a marginal player in Beed, mobilises as an autonomous (Dalit-led) Bahujan movement in Marathwada. While the ideological and principled politics dominate mobilisation processes of BSP, electoral compulsions bring the cadre face-to-face with caste arithmetic and the money power that dominates electoral politics. This clash of principled politics and politics of power in the BSP presents the forced marginalisation of ideological considerations. While BSP and MHA are partially forced into the margins to replicate the power processes of dominant political parties during and after elections, they retain their non-political roots and commitment to anti-caste ideology and politics, thus sustaining Dalit politics in the arena of electoral and non-electoral politics.

The concluding chapter revisits the liberal struggle to make caste status irrelevant in the civil realm due to its inherent primitivism. The collective trauma of Dalits requires caste to be at the centre of their anti-caste struggles. Dalit politics, I argue, has no doubt changed the local norms of civility and has partially cured discriminatory elements of society. Dalit politics engages in what Alexander (2006) calls civil repair, thus contributing to the continuing process of reforming the state, society and civil society.



# 1

## Caste and Dalit Politics in the Making of Civil Society

The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste.

(Ambedkar 1945)

I am preparing to organise masses who have been victimised by the caste system...Caste is not a problem for us but an opportunity and we must know how to use it at the appropriate time and occasion.

(Kanshiram, undated: quoted in *Mahanayak* 2007)

The above epigraphs from two prominent Dalit public figures reveal the complexity of state and civil society formation in India and the centrality of caste in these processes. Ambedkar framed the Hindu cosmology, its ritual sovereignty and caste publics as an illiberal condition of intolerance and rudeness. Civilising India through formation of a modern state and a dynamic civil society was central to Ambedkar's project of India's liberation. Ambedkar aspired to annihilate caste so as to create a truly liberal civility and civil society where political equality displaces the normality of caste violence.

Kanshiram's quote above sets out the complex strategies that post-Ambedkar Dalit movements enlist to make the 'ideals' of Ambedkarism work. Caste, for Kanshiram, has a cultural and political role that could radically transform the unequal character of Indian society and democracy. Ambedkar's liberal critique of caste incivilities and Kanshiram's



## 2 Civility against Caste

Ambedkarite praxis unravel the dynamism of caste and provide insights into the vibrancy of India's civil society and its problems.

In this chapter, I make a case for understanding civil society as a realm of political freedom that emerged in India during the colonial period. Based on an analysis of caste and the rise of Dalit politics in public sphere of western India, I call for a critical revision of the idea of civil society to counter arguments that either limits civil society to elite politics or caste politics to a decay of civil society. The limited spaces of political freedom that emerged in the colonial period were largely dominated by the upper castes (mostly Brahmans). However, the lower caste masses too were able to participate and influence the colonial state by organising around ideologies of protest that countered dominant nationalist currents. The growth of localised ideologies of protest and hegemony in associational and extra-institutional forms continued under the postcolonial democratic state.

The nature of mobilisation in the civil realm; and the interface of caste, civil society and state suggest two specific outcomes: firstly, community, particularly caste, became central in constructing local forms of civil/uncivil society and modernity. Secondly, caste and state continued to intersect and co-evolve in the local civilising processes of India.

The chapter proceeds as follows: I begin by explicating an eclectic approach to civil society which helps us understand the centrality of civil society and caste in India's democracy. This is followed by a brief discussion of challenges posed to civil society by liberal and postcolonial scholars. I engage with the shortcomings of liberal and postcolonial notions of civil society through presenting the dynamic intersections of caste and civil society in colonial and postcolonial periods, particularly the aspiration of civility and civil society amongst the castes lower down the order. The chapter presents Dalit mobilisation in West India to detail the intersections of caste, state and civil society and their amenability to ideologies of hegemony and protest. Having detailed the complex intersections of caste, state and civil society in the local civilising process of India, I make a case of study of present-day Dalit politics.

### Civil Society and Civility

Civil society has come to dominate discourses of development and social change since about 1980. Although there is a lack of consensus on what

constitutes civil society, the idea of it has become increasingly celebrated across academic, activist as well as national and international bureaucratic circles. The liberal notion—that a free and vibrant civil society forms the heart of successful democratic regimes (Gellner 1994)—is increasingly held to be common sense. Civil society in its normative liberal form gained ground after the 1989 revolutions of West and Eastern Central Europe (Kumar 1993). This was followed by manifold debates around the forms, meanings and utility of the concept of civil society encompassing scholars across varied traditions and ideologies. I will not follow the much travelled path of summarising the development of civil society in the Western context which has been carried out systematically by several scholars.<sup>1</sup> Rather, my focus here is on elaborating and engaging with the challenges posed to the utility of the concept of civil society in explaining or understanding aspects of contemporary India.

A narrow definition of civil society with an emphasis on associations, or limiting civil society as a space against the state, or civil society as an ideal/good society falls short of dealing with the challenge of civility and civil society in India. Besides missing the vibrancy of civil society in the form of extra-institutional movements, these narrow definitions fail to capture the diverse strategies that competing actors in civil society adopt.

For my purposes, therefore, I take civil society to refer to political and sociocultural spaces of freedom for collective mobilisations that are dependent on the state for legitimacy but are also autonomous in their functioning. The state is not purged from society or civil society; rather, civil society serves as infrastructure for strengthening the legitimacy of the state (Mann 1986). As the rest of this book details, state and society are thickly intertwined in India, transcending the dichotomy of state and society or state and civil society, thus helping explore the state as part of society or what Midgal (2001) terms ‘state in society’.

However, I see value in Gramsci’s heuristic<sup>2</sup> separation of civil society from the state and economy (Gramsci 1971: 31). While Gramsci views civil society as an apparatus that sustains the state’s hegemonic project he also acknowledges the emancipatory potential of civil society and the challenge it can pose to hegemony. The burden of achieving democratic civility lie not on the state but on the society at large,

<sup>1</sup>See Khilnani (2001), Kumar (1993), Cohen and Arato (1994).

<sup>2</sup>See Buttigieg (2005) for a sophisticated clarification of this separation in Gramsci.

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particularly those social groups and associations that seek to radically alter traditional social inequalities. I draw from Habermas's (1991) view that civil society and public sphere are a project of long-term civilising of political and societal relations. However, his ideal of rational public deliberation in civil society has shortcomings in the Indian context (Bhandari 2006).

To explore the emancipatory potential of civil society, I understand civil society in a broad communitarian sense to include associational and non-associational forms of mobilisation and organisation which could evolve around ethnic and non-ethnic identities and can be both institutional and extra-institutional in nature. Civil society, thus, is not merely about institutions but also about a process of expanding spaces of political freedoms for those beyond traditionally privileged political groups. Cohen and Arato's (1994) emphasis on conscious association building as a key process in civil society is important for the study of caste inequalities, particularly in examining the daily processes of civil society through Dalit politics and the politicisation of Dalits.

Civil society is in many ways a reflection of the society and, therefore, the possibility of conflict within remains at the heart of civil society (Chandhoke 2001). These processes of conflict and consensus constantly reinvent civil society and the state. For marginalised groups, civil society processes and politics can open spaces for making claims of citizenship and justice. Such claims are embedded in complex and unequal social relations making consensus building around these claims a process full of conflicts. Justice, as argued by Alexander (2006), is an outcome of social and cultural conflicts and the complex interplay of these conflicts influence human qualities that are included and respected in civil society. The making of civil society, 'thus, is a project and cannot be achieved, even in the fullest flush of success' (Alexander 2006: 9). Civil society, thus, remains a space for critical and complex public conversations influencing the goals and values of governance and for reforming not just state and society but civil society itself.

Posing the challenge of civility onto civil society helps us disentangle the complexities involved in the daily practice of political equality and dignity in India. Civility is a key measure of the success of democracy, as 'it involves treating others as, at least, equal in dignity, never as inferior in dignity' (Shils 1991: 12). The concepts of civilising and civility particularly facilitate exploring Dalits protest and their challenge to caste hubris. The emphasis on civility and civil society as processes also counter the phobia attached to morals of civil society and to unravel challenges involved in achieving civility under caste *doxa*. My understanding of

civil society is therefore eclectic so as to comprehend the dynamism of civil society and its liberatory potentials. Civil society in this study is neither antithetical to liberal morals nor limited to liberal prescriptions on forms of civil society.

Civilising processes involves ‘transformations of the subjectivity and the self on the one hand and the larger-scale institutional processes of state formation and its underlying mechanisms of power relations on the other’ (Krieken 2010: 39). The caste *doxa* sets up a specific context of subject formation and civilising process in India. As opposed to the congruence of development of ‘nation-state’ in the European context, the state in India has been more of an empire in nature comprising of self-regulating groups (Rudolph 1987). In the Indian subcontinent, caste as a self-regulating system has traversed both public and private realms and imprinted itself into the working of local polities and state. Processes of civility and modernity are thus intrinsically linked to state formation and reconstruction of caste relations in India. Caste also constructs localised challenges to the making of civil society and political freedoms in India.

## India’s Civil Society Problem?

The origin of civil society as a modern political phenomenon is Western both in terms of thought and practice. Does the Western orientation embedded in the notion of civil society therefore act as an impediment to its use in non-western contexts? Goody (2001) suggests that the problem is aggravated in the case of civil society due to ‘moral evaluation’ attached to concepts of ‘civility’ ‘rationality’ and ‘enlightenment’. The challenges posed to the practice and possibility of civil society in India is not restricted to suspicion of civil society as a Western/colonial imposition.

In the study of Indian politics, there are two major critiques of civil society. One is found in the normative liberal understanding (Béteille 2005, Chibber 1999) that fears the dominance of social identities in civil society. The other is rejection of the very concept of civil society in postcolonial societies (Chatterjee 2001, 2004, 2011). While the former, doubts the democratic potentials of the present form of civil society in India, the later seems to suggest that civil society and mass politics are antithetical.

Gellner’s (1995) discomfort with segmental loyalties in the sphere of civil society is voiced in Béteille’s (1999) critique of caste imposition

(caste-based reservations) on intermediary institutions (e.g., universities). In a similar vein, Chibber (1999) maintains that associational life in India is weak and this enables political parties to play a larger role. For B  teille (2005) and Chibber (1999) associationalism and movements around social and communal identities do not constitute ‘civil’ society as civil society is based on associationalism amongst individuals and not on their social identities.

Chatterjee (2001, 2004) provides a far deeper and contextual criticism of civil society, for him civil society undervalues the dynamism of ‘community’ in postcolonial societies. Chatterjee (2001, 2004) problematises the universal claims of liberation that (Western) civil society promises to offer. He doubts the conceptual and political relevance of civil society due to its individualist orientation embedded in ideas of enlightenment, modernity and capitalism. Chatterjee (2004) draws on Foucault’s conception of governmentality and subject formation. The subjects/governed mobilise as populations to protest governmentality and not as civil society (Chatterjee 2004).

Chatterjee (2001, 2004) evolves an innovative concept of ‘political society’ to comprehend the politics of the governed in postcolonial societies. He pitches political society and democracy against modernity, capitalism and civil society. Political society is about politics of populations (community) and not the individuals that civil society and modernity privileges (Chatterjee 2001, 2004).

While the liberals aspire for a civil society devoid of communal identities and politics of identity, Chatterjee (2001, 2004) posits destruction of community as central to modernity and capital, civil society constitutes key element of colonial civilising mission therefore. Though starkly varying in emphases, social identity/community seems to be a central problem of civil society for both the postcolonial and the liberal scholars. For the former, civil society is inherently an elite (comprising of individuals) conception that cannot accommodate politics of ‘community’ and ‘populations’. For the latter, civil society essentially decays when dominated by communal and social identities. Both the approaches risk throwing out the baby with the bath water by not looking at the dynamism and synthesis of community and civil society and the productive roles these can play in civilising processes.

Chatterjee’s (2004) idea of political society has been criticised for its vagueness (Mannathukkaren 2010) and inability to comprehend challenges of solidarity (Gudavarthy and Vijay 2007). Similarly, if we follow liberals like Chibber (1999) and Gellner (1994), finding civil society in

India is almost impossible. Scholars (Chandhoke 2001, Rudolph 2003, Rudolph 2000 and Varshney 2001) have therefore questioned the very basis of claims that deny the existence of strong civil society in India. Rudolph (2003: 1118), for instance, observes:

If caste associations, demand groups, issue and movement politics and non-governmental organisations are taken into account, India could be 'read' as having a pervasive and extraordinarily active associational life, perhaps one of the most participatory in the world.

My criticism of the postcolonialist and the liberal analyses is about their absolutist views on civil society and social identities respectively. These I suggest, fail to develop a processual understanding of civil society, civility and formation of modern subjects in India. The 'autonomy' of civil society and the importance of universal ideas that inform it (Alexander 2006), remain relevant to the Indian context as well. It is the lack of this autonomous space or a civil sphere for collective mobilisations that makes any effort to trace the existence of civil society or public sphere in pre-colonial India a difficult proposition. The public sphere in pre-colonial India was not egalitarian and was largely dominated by power-holding elites, excluding women and the masses (Hasan 2005). In pre-colonial India, civil society did not exist and there was no concept of citizenship (Béteille 1999).

Civil society as a realm of political freedom in India emerged during the colonial period. Contesting arguments have prevailed on the figurations of caste and civil society in colonial India. Did caste associations form as organic movements? Did caste become a specific form of civil society as a result of the colonial technologies of governance? Was caste incompatible with colonial modernity? I will now turn to an assessment of the intersections of caste and civil society in colonial India. This will help us address the problems posed by liberal and postcolonial scholars to the idea and practice of civil society in India.

## **Caste and Civil Society in Colonial India: Interface of the Opposites?**

There are two important perspectives on the origins of civil society and intersections of caste and civil society in the colonial period that are

important to decipher the dynamism of caste and civil society. One maintains that caste remained a major challenge to the introduction of the idea of citizenship during the British period. The closed societal relations arising out of caste (and also religion) affected the possibilities of individuation and freedom as they existed in the West (Bhargava and Reifeld 2005, Bêteille 1999). The second important position is to be found in Kaviraj (2001) and Chatterjee (2001) who argue that civil society in its early inchoate form was created in the colonial period by and for the elites. Both perspectives, however, offer only a partial view of the complexity and dynamism of caste in its interface with the evolving spheres of civil society.

The understanding of caste as a strictly rigid form of hierarchy based on the principles of purity and pollution has been an issue of debate. Such an understanding would turn caste into *Gemeinschaft*, making the possibility of *Gessellschaft* in India almost impossible.<sup>3</sup> Dumont's (1980) thesis of Hindu religious values dominating the state and sustaining a hierarchic caste structure has however long been challenged (Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 2003, Appadurai 1988). Caste is said to have turned rigid due to a 'modern' kind of discourse that emerged under colonial governance. This discourse insisted on having a fixed determinate form for local collectives, as destruction of community was fundamental to the project of capitalism/modernity (Chatterjee 1996). Many of the arguments about the formation of caste as a rigid structure in postcolonial discourses are attributed to the 1872 Census of the British government, a process of communal enumeration. The British, in trying to be fair referees, made political representation 'communal' and created fixed communal categories (Chakraborty 1994). Dirks (1997) goes a step further in this strand of argument to claim that colonialism created much of what is now accepted as Indian 'tradition', including the autonomous caste structure. Caste achieved its critical position in colonial times, because the British state was successful in separating caste as a social form from its dependence on pre-colonial political processes and caste became a specifically Indian

<sup>3</sup>For Tonnies (1988: xvii), '*Gemeinschaft* (community) was deeply conservative and sheer antiquity of a rule was enough to justify its application and the imposing religious sanctions of heaven and hell assured compliance. *Gemeinschaft* demanded structure of church and authority of pope. *Gemeinschaft* was irrelevant and politically dangerous for a modern society (civil society/*Gessellschaft*).'

form of civil society as a result of the colonial project to legitimise its rule over colonial subjects (Dirks 1997).

These views, however, underplay the pre-colonial sociocultural, political and material basis of caste inequality and also the dynamic transformation that caste society was witnessing as a response to the political and economic changes during the colonial period. Guha (2003: 162–163) reminds us that communal enumeration processes were also present in the pre-colonial period and suggests that pre-colonial community structures survived into the colonial era using the colonial public sphere to assert their claims. Similarly, Lorenzen (1999: 654) observes that ‘caste, like Hinduism, undoubtedly responded to the British conquest with significant changes, but neither institution was so radically transformed during the colonial period to claim that the British invented them’.<sup>4</sup>

As discussed above, Chatterjee (1996) seems to challenge the possibility of the movement from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (civil society) as a problematic of the discourse of modernity. The discourse of the modern state, he suggests, cannot provide a theoretical language in which community (caste) can be discussed and the struggle between the narrative of capital and community has, therefore, remained unresolved. Such an approach fails to capture the interface between civil society and caste vis-à-vis the politics that was surfacing between the elites and the masses in the political realm. The interface of caste with the colonial imposition of civil society that forced new rules of politics could also help us critically examine Chatterjee’s (2001) second proposition that civil society in colonial India belonged to the elites.

### ***Politics of the Evolving Civil Society and the Public Sphere***

Civil society as a political arena of associational activity did emerge during the colonial period, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. Before the colonial interpolation of civil society, India had non-liberal forms of pluralism that were constituted by social groups; however, with widening scope of citizenship, these groups reconstituted

<sup>4</sup>Dharma Kumar cautions historians against over emphasising the exploitative nature of colonialism and the possibility of underplaying pre-colonial local social conditions of inequality. She also discusses sociopolitical contributions including the growth of a public sphere in the colonial period (Kumar 1998).



as political agents (Khilnani 2001). These spaces of civil society were largely engaged by local elite castes to protest against the limited scope for their political mobility and for independence from the colonial rulers. The second mode of associationalism came from the lower castes (especially those exposed to Western education through Christian missionaries). This, however, was a case of unintended consequences: the British did not intend to effect such social changes in Indian society, but their diverse interventions began to rupture the traditional bonds that held the ascriptive hierarchy of caste together (Aloysius 1997: 21–51).

The localised civic culture that evolved in the colonial public sphere revived the fractured indigenous ideologies of change, protest and hegemony. While the ‘twice-born’ (pure) castes became active members of the civil society created under the British regime, the Shudra castes too were able to carve out spaces of resistance. An example of how the colonial government opened up new associational spaces was in the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860, which continues to be important and survives (with some amendments) to enable registration of various non-profit organisations today (Sheth and Sethi 1991). After the act was passed, registered societies started cropping up in many places and with diverse forms, including caste and religion based associations.

Carroll (1978) limits her analysis of caste associations to the rise of elites amongst castes and the success of these elites in seeking state patronage. Besides homogenising the fractured nature of caste mobilisation across India, she denies the colonised any of their own agency or civic sense.<sup>5</sup> The limited conditions of modernity—the growth of the printing press, education, the changing economy and the evolving public sphere—produced new elites amongst upper caste groups and some of the lower castes. The ‘untouchables’ were definitely last in terms of accessing these sociopolitical spaces.

The specific local conditions of caste hierarchy and its fragmented ideologies paved the way for the growth of associational culture and resistance movements aimed at transforming caste status and relations in the twentieth century. These movements also reconstructed local

<sup>5</sup>See Carroll’s (1978) study of the Kayastha movement which highlights the ‘one-man show’ nature in terms of leadership. Carroll sees these organisations as a response to colonial constructions, specifically for seeking patronage in terms of jobs from the British government.

ideologies of change, protest and hegemony. The local mobilisations were organised around three competing prominent ideologies: Gandhian nationalism, Hindu nationalism and low-caste movements claiming citizenship rights under the emergent colonial state.<sup>6</sup> All three mobilisations intrinsically dealt with the question of caste and religion in different modes. While indigenous varieties of nationalisms were at the heart of Gandhian and Hindu projects, low-caste political movements mobilised not merely against the colonial state but also against uncivil elements of society. As opposed to the elite movements that sought the formation of nation-state in the shadow of a greater past and culture, low-caste movements sought reform of caste and society through modern politics. These competing currents resorted to associational culture as the prime mode of organisation, but extra-institutional mobilisation connoting the growth of social movements was also visible.

### ***Competing Associations, Castes and Politics***

Gandhian nationalism focused on bringing together competing castes and religions (specifically Muslims and Hindus) under one umbrella in the struggle against the British colonial state. Gandhi voiced this through the Indian National Congress (INC), a political organisation that was largely dominated by and articulated the interests of the elite castes. The 'other', in what became known as the Gandhian critique of modernity, was necessarily British rule and its modern institutions. According to Rudolph and Rudolph (2006), Gandhian mobilisation contradicts Habermas's insistence on critical rational exchanges as the basis for communication in a society where the majority of the people were illiterate. They argue that the 'coffee house' was reconstructed by Gandhi to suit the local context of India who envisioned the public sphere as an ashram where commitment to changing hearts as well as minds was the foundation for a democratised public sphere, and the language of publics was both communal (religious) and individual centric (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006: 140–174).

<sup>6</sup>I am consciously limiting my discussion to mobilisations around these three ideologies in order to focus on the theme under discussion: The Intersections of Caste and Civil Society. This is not to underplay other critical mobilisations such as the Muslim League, the Peasant movements and the Women's Movement, all of which can be critically examined through a caste lens.

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The Hindu nationalist movement was a movement that developed in parallel to the growth of Gandhian nationalism. Hindu nationalism rejected the non-violent positioning of Gandhian ideology and celebrated violent Hindu traditions as a means of securing freedom. Jaffrelot (2007: 6) sees the growth of Hindu cultural nationalism as a modern phenomenon that developed on the basis of organisational strategies of ideology building. Hindu nationalist mobilisation began with the formation of *Brahmo Samaj* (1828), and then *Arya Samaj* (1875) and later the *Hindu Sabhas* (1907) and then the *Hindu Sanghatans* (1915). Jaffrelot (2007) describes a historical shift in this movement from Hindu reform to Hindu revivalism. All these organisations had close ties with the INC. Under the project of Hindu nationalism, all castes were expected to unite against the common enemies, which had been configured as Muslim assertion and Christianity (especially lower caste conversions). Some limited reform of Hindu religion was also a mobilising strategy for including lower castes and upper caste women in its ambit.

The emerging Gandhian ideas of the nation and nationalism were countered here by promoting the idea of Hindus as the majority community and the race that could embody the potential independent nation (Hansen 1999). Hindu nationalism and its mobilisation had not been able to take much hold in the colonial period due to the dominance of the INC, which to an extent successfully united the masses and the elites under its ambiguous union of political and spiritual ideologies.<sup>7</sup>

The imagined national community both of Gandhi's Congress and of Hindu nationalism were largely based on caste Hindu traditions, the former with slight Bhakti<sup>8</sup> orientation and the latter with Brahmanism as its base. Colonial India, however, also saw the emergence of a lower caste subaltern nationalism which was based on its *oppressed past* as the 'other' (Aloysius 1997). Growth in the press, military recruitment, the liberal values of Christian missionary education, development of cities under the new economic regime and the rise of associational activity, were intertwined with changes in the lower echelons of the caste structure. First, it was the Shudras who organised and protested against 'caste

<sup>7</sup>For the politics of Gandhian synthesis see Aloysius (1997: 170–213) and a re-reading in Rao (2009).

<sup>8</sup>Bhakti literally means devotion and Bhakti movement(s) is a term used to refer to various sociocultural sects and practices preached by saints in medieval India. These were considered to be against inequalities of caste, class and gender and had element of modernity; see Lele (1981) and Lorenzen (1995).

disabilities'. In spite of the fact that the judiciary played a limited role (it generally judged in favour of upper castes), it was actively engaged by the new elite amongst low-caste groups.<sup>9</sup>

The conflict and competition that was emerging within the Indian society gained new forms, constructing fragmentation and conflict within the evolving civil society. Whilst analysis of the new waves of capitalism and colonialism requires a critique on moral grounds, there is also a need to recognise that local practices of civility historically were not just, when it came to citizenship possibilities for untouchables. Washbrook (1990) rightly questions the 'all is bad with capitalism' approach and suggests that this may result in other kinds of 'orientalism with moral intention'. He further argues that the British Raj was never simply an instrument of foreign domination, it also related to struggles inside South Asian society for status, privilege and power.

Such struggles in western India translated into the growth of non-Brahman mobilisation against Brahman dominance in evolving civil society and state. These associations also temporarily integrated untouchable concerns within a newly imagined non-Brahman community that attempted to mobilise against Brahmins and Brahmanism.

## **The Rise of Untouchable Politics and Ideology in Western India (the Bombay Presidency)**

The 1830s to 1840s in western India witnessed the growth of the printing press and production of periodicals both in English and Marathi, some of which were controlled by the Christian missionaries. A new elite amongst non-Brahman groups emerged through exposure to Western education and also due to the evolving public sphere that was open to 'political' criticism of the dominant values and religion. Western India, also, had a specific history of the Peshwas (Brahmins) overthrowing Maratha<sup>10</sup> rule to establish a Brahmanic state. Rao (2009) suggests that this created the ground for a novel alliance between peasant protests and anti-caste thought, the former being the Shudras and the latter

<sup>9</sup>See Galanter (1963) and Rudolph and Rudolph (1963) for the Brahmanical bias of colonial legislation.

<sup>10</sup>Marathas referred to as small social elite who were considered Shudras by the Brahmins in western India, a claim that Maratha Kings contested.

Atishudra.<sup>11</sup> In order to sustain the struggle against Brahmanic dominance, in 1873 Jyotirao Phule<sup>12</sup> founded the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (the truth-seeking society). This had a clear ideology that aimed at access to modern education for Shudra and Atishudra castes and promoting cultural-religious protest by giving up Hindu practices that gave primacy to the ritual leadership of the Brahmans. Phule's ideology starkly contrasted with the Hindu nationalist and Congress ideologies in its celebration of Western ideals and the enlightenment, in its overt support to the colonial rule and in viewing Brahmanism as its 'other' (Gavaskar 1999, O'Hanlon 1985).<sup>13</sup>

Naregal (2001) while exploring the evolving vernacular public sphere in western India maintains that it was dominated by the conservative interests of upper castes. She also describes the low-caste counter-public and its associational form in *Satyashodhak Samaj* formed by Phule, and highlights how Phule understood the importance of education in modern politics. Education and political representation became sites of conflict therefore. 'The limited potential of the upper-caste intelligentsia to develop an inclusive discourse found itself at odds with the logic of representative politics, resulting in historical incompleteness of the hegemonic influence they were able to establish' (Naregal 2001: 272).

The hegemonic influence of the upper castes, however, was strengthened after the end of Phule's ideological leadership of the non-Brahman movement. Phule belonged to a lower Shudra caste and tried to merge the interests of Shudras and Atishudras through forging an imagined anti-Brahman community of the Kshatriya (warriors). It was only Shahu Maharaj (a Maratha king of Kolhapur province) who pursued a fully non-Brahman politics (Copland 1973). The non-Brahman mobilisation was dominated by Marathas and did not always accommodate the concerns of untouchable castes easily. Rodrigues (1998) suggests that the non-Brahman movement was never an ideological union of castes and the interests of land-owning Marathas dominated. Further, the Marathas, who claimed Kshatriya status, did not accommodate untouchables. The anti-Congress ideology of Phule and the non-Brahman movement came

<sup>11</sup>Shudra is the lowest and impure Varna in the Varna order and the *Atishudra* is classed as outside of the Varna order, and therefore, classified as 'untouchable'.

<sup>12</sup>Born into the Mali (gardener) caste, a Shudra caste that is lower than Marathas.

<sup>13</sup>Menon (1997) presents a detailed critique of Chatterjee by discussing the celebration of enlightenment, modernity and English education amongst the lower castes.

to an end with the Marathas joining the Congress and the dissolution of the Non-Brahman Party in December 1930. The Kshatriya ideology that Phule constructed to undo the dominance of Brahmins (as Aryans) in the ritual and political spheres was diverted by the Marathas to claim higher social status, thereby constructing the untouchables as the lower 'other'. It was now left to the untouchable movements to take forward remnants of the anti-caste ideology constructed by Phule. The untouchables saw a need to initiate an independent struggle to challenge their total exclusion, which was opposed not only by the Brahmins but also non-Brahmins, their former ideological counterparts.

Untouchable protests in western India thus evolved as a counter-current within non-Brahman politics. Hardtmann (2009) distinguishes between the earlier caste federations that emerged amongst the untouchables and the later Dalit movements, in that the former believed in Hindu reform and the latter in an autonomous anti-caste tradition. The late nineteenth century struggle of the untouchables in claiming educational rights made limited but important gains from colonial educational policy and the Christian missionaries in promoting untouchable education. Constable (2000) argues that the syncretic incorporation of the ideologies of Christian missionaries (who also brought some material help) radicalised untouchable local cultures, produced radical untouchable ideologies and created dynamism for structural social transformation through associations such as the *Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal* (Society for Removal of Problems of non-Aryan Origin) in 1890. The recruitment of untouchable castes in military service was banned from 1892 and untouchable leaders influenced by Phule's ideology challenged this exclusion. Constable (2001) demonstrates that the Kshatriya status claimed by untouchables under the influence of Phule was a contestatory consciousness that stood in opposition to the Brahmanic caste structure.

These initiatives were to provide a foundation for the later Dalit movement under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's struggle for political rights of untouchables/depressed classes had associations such as the *Bahiskrit Hitkarni Sabha* (Depressed Classes Society) and Peoples Education Society. These associational features and the extra-institutional struggle (protests) later took the form of political parties such as the Indian Labour Party, the Scheduled Caste Federation and finally the RPI (Omvedt 2004, Jaffrelot 2005 and Zelliott 1996). Ambedkar's scholarly political action mined the possibilities for collective emancipation and integration of Dalits through the use of both charitable and political associations.

The liberal rejection of segmental associations from civil society is similar to Ambedkar's fear of the 'tyranny of cousins' structured around caste in Hindu society, which he felt limited the possibilities of trust, civility and civil society across caste. Caste, for Ambedkar, stood in contradiction to democracy, caste could not be reformed and had to be annihilated.

I will return to the innovative interpretations of Ambedkar in present day Dalit politics in the following chapters. What is important to note here is that the newly emerging realm of civil society, under an alien and partially secular colonial state, created a buzz of political activity in the public sphere with the formation of associations around identities and socio-religious issues. Civil society did not necessarily emerge in contradiction to the state; rather, it was promoted by the colonial state at times to disaggregate the society and discipline its subjects.

The fragmented, dynamic and hierarchic caste society responded to this new sphere of political (in)dependence by organising around competing ideologies of change and hegemony. Though civil society was dependent on the colonial state for its legitimacy, it did have elements of political freedom. While lower caste associations and ideologies under civil society focussed on uniting the lower echelons of society primarily for their political rights, the other two dominant streams focussed on promoting associationalism across all castes under the patronising leadership of the upper castes. The caste context and the resulting movements in the newly evolving public sphere turned what had been the 'homogeneous' project of nationalism into something much more 'heterogeneous'.

Contrary to Chatterjee's (2001) proposition that civil society was the exclusive domain of interaction between elite Indians and the colonial/postcolonial state, civil society, even if limited to associations, was to a certain extent accessed by the lower castes. Chatterjee (2004), referring to Ambedkar's movement, acknowledges the impact of politics upon governmentality and concedes that incipient resistances may succeed in inventing new forms of social justice. However, he does not see an interface between civil society and the masses, especially the lower castes. For him, civil society belongs to the elites and the other forms of resistance lie outside its realm. Similarly, Kaviraj (2001: 311–312) observes, 'as long as politics was between elites and colonisers, rules of liberalism and etiquettes of civil society were observed punctiliously'. The elites, both of the Gandhian and Hindu varieties, focussed on 'nationalism' whereas Ambedkar sought to achieve the political 'extraordinary' of equal citizenship irrespective of

status. Dalits under Ambedkar thus transcended subalternity in aspiring for politics of civility and civil society, which included and surpassed nationalist concerns.

Where the evolving civic culture and public sphere interfaced with caste, they did reflect the contradictions of caste in terms of hierarchy, fragmentation and competition; however, they also created space for public conversations especially about the social role of the colonial government and about the hierarchies of caste. The colonial state and colonial forms of governmentality were new sites for influencing or solving the complex contradictions of caste inequalities. Civil society emerged as a sphere for communicating between and amongst competing ideologies and with the state. Crucial features of mobilisation in the realm of civil society during the colonial period were the implicit tendency to organise around ascriptive identities like religion and caste (and coalitions of these) and also the intense engagement with state. The intersections of caste and civil society, thus, came to be a local political necessity in postcolonial politics and modernity.

## **Caste and the Making of Society Civil in the Postcolonial Period**

The caste character of nascent civil society in the colonial period did in some way influence the civil society, sovereign state and politics that emerged around independence. The modern postcolonial state is criticised for being isolated from the logic of the social order (Kaviraj 1984), and for its secular aspirations that were not in touch with the cultural practices of ordinary citizens (Madan 1997). The Constitution of India was however not strictly ‘modern’, as it carried the contradictions of society, by guaranteeing fundamental rights to all citizens irrespective of caste, religion and gender and also by providing special representation for the SCs and STs (and later to the OBCs).<sup>14</sup> The secular and

<sup>14</sup>Other Backward Classes (OBCs) refer to the socially and economically backward communities other than SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs). They were identified as deserving of reservations in education and employment in the post-independent period. Most of the OBCs come from the lower Shudra varna.



liberal Constitution of India also protects the sacred Hindu cow,<sup>15</sup> thus the Hindus managed to save the cows through the Constitution and the lower caste radicals saved their political rights and access to education and employment through reservations.

The implications of caste as an active constituent of civil society in the colonial period continued in postcolonial politics, but under different conditions of democracy and a progressive Constitution, which makes extraordinary provisions for political equality. As understood by Ambedkar, India entered a period of contradictions, with equality in politics and inequality in social and economic life. Social and economic inequalities were seen by Ambedkar as a threat that could blow up the new democratic structure (Drèze 2004). Ambedkar preferred to curb the liberties of an oppressive civil society rather than limit those of the state (Baxi 2000). The recognition of caste inequality and injustices that Dalits faced were thus imposed on the Indian (civil) society through state measures and by laying Dalit as an 'exceptional legal subject' (Rao 2009).

The inequalities of caste further interacted with the scarce opportunities of mobility in social, political and economic life. The structures of the newly independent state were also sites of consolidation of power for the dominant classes. A certain kind of civil society was thus 'promoted' by the state, and the borders between the two blurred, with 'Congress' as the bridging institution that straddled both (Jenkins 2004). In the realm of associational culture, when the state was controlled by Congress and the upper castes, one noticed an increase in state supported civil society, be it Gandhian organisations, the cooperative movement or the *Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram* (Welfare for Forest Dwellers) of the Hindu nationalist variety. Most of these organisations relied on government funding, and 'gradually little difference could be seen between their work and the government programmes of social welfare' (Sheth and Sethi 1991: 53).

The 1970s, however, witnessed a growth of organisations, social movements and associations that were beyond state-controlled and state-promoted civil society. The students' movement in Bihar, *navnirman* (reconstruction) movement in Gujarat, Naxalite movement in West Bengal, Marxist feminist movement and the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra emerged during this time (Baviskar 2010). The emancipatory role of the state came under serious criticism around this time due to increasing corruption and poverty. 'The catalyst for the social

<sup>15</sup>For elements of Hindu bias in the constitution of India, see Singh (2005).

movements of the late 1970s was the state of Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975<sup>3</sup>, observes Baviskar (2010: 4). It is difficult, however, to club Dalit Panthers along with other movements that sprang as a reaction to Emergency. Dalit Panthers were formed in 1972 more as a radical reaction to factions of RPI and their appropriation in Congress; further, the Panthers took a positive view of emergency (Morkhandikar 1990). Civil society also served as a critical space for consolidating ethno-religious solidarities that were linked to Hindutva nationalist aspirations. Non-political Hindu nationalist organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)<sup>16</sup> contributed to the formation of Hindu nationalist parties—Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and later BJP.

The Gandhian homogenisation project of nationalism under the INC could not sustain itself for long as caste, region and religious configurations were growing strong in local level party politics. The consociational Congress system collapsed into parts under the pressures of identity politics. The signs of the collapse of the Congress system had started in the 1970s. Under the ideological legacy of Gandhi and the arrangement of the Congress system around patron/client relationship, democracy largely benefited the upper castes. India, according to Jaffrelot, overcame this Hobson's choice (of change), 'thanks to social transformation from below which occurred in the realm of caste' (Jaffrelot 2003: 492–493).<sup>17</sup>

The dynamic nature of caste possessed the inherent potential to divide and create hierarchies, leaving India as a country of fractured minorities in current times. Some castes have been traditionally privileged in terms of access to power and capital (social, economic, political and cultural) while others have started reversing the power structure in their favour under the conditions of democracy. Caste-based mobilisation has at times been utilised for securing state patronage and, therefore, has required the support of numbers which cannot be gained merely through specific caste-based organisation; mobilisation across caste has become a necessity. Rudolph (1965) points to the possible modernisation of caste that could happen through its interaction with democracy and electoral politics. Gellner's (1995) concept of modular civility is thus achieved at times under the pressures of electoral politics. In electoral politics, besides the compulsions of caste arithmetic that facilitated the merger of castes into temporal political collectives, postcolonial politics has

<sup>16</sup>Although Rudolph (2000: 1766) denies RSS the status of an association that generates social capital for democracy, it is nevertheless an association.

<sup>17</sup>Rudolph (1965) suggests that revolution was spared in India due to transformation of caste.

also witnessed a real deepening of democracy through the rise of Shudra castes in party politics (Varshney 2000, Jaffrelot 2003).

Local associationalism intersects with wider politics of identity that may be pursued by both political parties and social movements (Mosse 2006). Electoral politics and political parties, thus, remain critical in local democratisation processes. The expulsion of political parties from the study of civil society can be limiting. The INC, for instance, shifted from being an association to a political party that accommodated elite caste and class interests in postcolonial politics. In general, the interweaving of caste, religious and regional identities in electoral competition also suggests the centrality of political parties as civil society institutions of self-assertion and realisation.

In Maharashtra, which is the focus of this book, the intersections of party politics and social movements are most visible in Dalit and Hindutva politics. While associationalism can be a result of electoral competition and patronage culture in electoral politics, conversely associations formed for ideological goals too can lead to formation of political parties. For instance, associational mobilisation of Bahujan and Minority Community Employees Federation (BAMCEF) in Maharashtra eventually resulted in the formation of the BSP. This calls for an understanding of the 'associational' dimensions of political mobilisation amongst the lower castes, especially their ideological and critical rational dimensions.

The initial foundations of BSP were laid through the formation of 'The Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and Minority Community Employees Association' by organising the middle class elites amongst these groups. This later turned into BAMCEF. In 1980, BAMCEF had around 200,000 members of whom 500 held PhDs and 15,000 were scientists largely from Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra (Jaffrelot 2003: 391). This strictly elite association was transformed into the structure of a political party, the BSP, through intensive grassroots organising. The merger of middle-class interests with those of the rural downtrodden masses in the BSP's mobilisation is detailed in later chapters. What is relevant here is the challenges that a naïve understanding of 'middle classes' can pose in studying caste politics particularly, Dalit politics. Pandey (2008) problematises the idea of a homogeneous middle class and points to the possibilities of a 'subaltern' middle class amongst Dalits. Like most movements, leadership in Dalit politics came from the comparatively well-to-do amongst them. Amongst the Dalit movements, therefore, 'civil' (elite) and 'political' (masses) need not necessarily be at loggerheads and may continue to intersect.

A demand for civility remained at the heart of Dalit politics. Dalit claims and politics of civility have to be distinguished from what Bailey (1996) has termed the local practices of civility in India. 'Civility of indifference' for Bailey (1996) is where caste conflicts do not result in war. In the dynamic and hierarchical context of caste, however, the understanding of civility cannot be limited to mere politeness, respect for liberal institutions or toleration of difference. The repulsive nature of caste can innovatively merge hierarchy into the practice of difference. Such political civility is very similar to Hall's (1998) conception of civility of 'social cages' where equal treatment to all is rendered difficult.

Caste, thus, has not been in conflict with democracy and civil society in postcolonial politics. Civil society is not a non-political but a non-state space of solidarity building, collective identity formation and is inherently linked to civilising processes. Therefore, the distinction that Chatterjee (2001) carves out between civil society and political society to sustain his earlier proposition of a contradiction between modernity and community becomes problematic. Caste has a Janus-faced nature, continuing to inhabit both tradition and modernity (Prakash 2002) and oppression and emancipation at once.

The current contexts of globalisation and neo-liberalism that are increasingly transforming the state and civil society seem to merge innovatively with caste instead of displacing it. The growth of the neo-liberal state is coupled with the increased presence of transnational development organisations and major social movements revolving around 'market' (liberalisation), *mandir/masjid*, Mandal and Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movements (Baviskar 2010). Caste, however, continues to be a key element in local democratisation that affects and aids civilising process. Further, material versus symbolic distinction does not help in the study of Dalit movements neither does the liberal insistence on excluding caste or ethnic mobilisation from the realm of civil society.

Caste functions not only as a source of inequality but as a resource for mobilisation against inequalities. We need, therefore, to move beyond traditional Indological approaches oriented toward culturalism which have contributed toward a diminishing of class analysis in South Asian studies (Chibber 2006). Radical democratisation involves the elimination of the structural relations of oppression that are often combined with class relations in many complicated ways (Smith 1998: 30–31). There are multiple ways of making democracy radical and the Dalit case for civility helps retrieve the radical substance of democracy. This book is

an anthropological exploration of present conditions that create newer contexts, challenges and opportunities for Dalit politics.

***What Does the Dynamism of Caste, Civil Society and State Mean for Dalits in Globalised Times and Spaces?***

There is a debate amongst scholars on the effects and possibilities that globalisation and capitalist expansion have for both civil society and the state. Some scholars highlight the emergence of a transnational/global civil society that can facilitate access to networks and resources (Appadurai 2001, Olesen 2005). While others emphasise, the rise of neo-liberalism and the decreased role of the state in the provision of welfare and an increased fragmentation of civil society, both are seen as negative outcomes that increasingly de-politicise civil society and weaken the state. With the increasing assertion of neo-liberal ideas in India, Harriss has warned: 'Poorer people may be excluded through the "new politics" and progressively denied the possibility of engaging in politics as self-realisation' (Harriss 2005: 35). On similar lines, Basile and Harriss-White (2000) argue that various civic-social organisations formed around caste sustain the hegemony of the capitalist class. A radical left reading of the Dalit situation with only class inequality at the core of its analyses may not offer the requisite insights into the fragmented nature of Dalit agency, protests and resistance at the (globalised) grassroots.

The intersections of local and international/global forms of civil society actors may not be necessarily a threat in terms of a politics of change. Besides its increasing relevance in local politics, caste has also 'travelled' globally through the linkages of globalisation (Ramaiah 2009, Ilaiyah 2006). While the debate on international civil society spaces and their influence on Dalit politics continues, there is also disagreement amongst scholars on how globalisation affects Dalit material conditions. Nigam (2002) argues that instead of opposing globalisation, Dalit politics is hoping to gain a Dalit bourgeoisie. Recent research on Uttar Pradesh has documented substantial improvement in the lives of Dalits and has urged that development be reconceptualised as 'freedom from social inequality' (Kapur et al. 2010).

In resorting to democratic processes and means, Dalit movements do not aspire for millenarian intervention or a sudden revolution. While the burden of protecting Indian culture against Western civilisation has been a local elite concern, carving out possibilities of local civility and

civil society has been at the heart of Dalit politics. In their emphasis on undoing social inequalities, Dalit movements also partially challenge economic exclusion of Dalits. The power relation embedded in caste, state and civil society become key processes that may aid or obstruct the complex practices of Dalit politics. No doubt, Dalit politics may not seem like 'revolution' to left radicals nor does it neatly fit into what Appadurai (2001) calls 'politics of patience'. Acts of resistance are means to modest goals, suggests Scott (1985: 347). The same cannot be said about Dalits and Dalit politics as they engage in challenging their inferior social status and in writing a new contract for themselves with the caste society and state.

Changing the 'untouchable' status of Dalits involves Dalit assertion and self-realisation and these processes are riddled with conflict and violence. Locally, depending on the regional or the specific village context of politicisation of Dalits, caste may operate either to reproduce hierarchical ritual practices in terms of caste-cooperation or to redefine practices in order to accommodate the radical interests of Dalits.<sup>18</sup> Dalit organising at the grassroots is not always peaceful and can lead to violence and counter-violence. Gorringe (2005: 85–111) refers to these violent Dalit protests as extra-institutional mobilisation and suggests that they may reflect the failure rather than the operation of the institutions of interest mediation.

Further, the changes in caste do not occur in a cultural vacuum and the fragmented institutions of the state could play a critical role. I am, therefore, cautious of approaches that overemphasise the disciplining and civilising power of the colonial state, coupled with a linear reasoning that stresses governmentality and its role in consolidating caste identities and politics under the colonial and postcolonial state. This approach may overlook the politics of the excluded that surface at the margins and their critical engagement with both the state and society. Governmentality also helps us understand the complex relationship between structure and agency and power–knowledge strategies function both as instruments of

<sup>18</sup>Two interesting cases for comparison are Tamil Nadu and Orissa. Orissa has seen what Tanabe (2006) terms the reinvention of new sacrificial practices based on caste cooperation. Caste in Orissa, argues Tanabe, has withered away in the politico-economic sphere and has been reformulated in ritual sphere. On the other hand, Clark-Deces (2006) describes the radicalism of Dalits in Tamil Nadu in redefining the nature of mourning rituals so as to free the Paraiyars (untouchable caste) from shameful ritual obligations.

control and as points of resistance (Lacombe 1996). The state, therefore, is not above or fully separated from society. The daily working of the state and society point to blurred boundaries of both and also a combination of state-based legal authority and traditional authority (Fuller and Harriss 2001). The threats posed to the state and its welfare potentials under globalisation are real, but, the state continues to have a critical role in local politics despite the growth of NGOs. Whilst pointing to the vital role that the state can continue to play, however, Randeria (2007) regards the Indian state as ‘cunning’:

[C]unning states manage to have conveniently few duties towards their citizens. Given the political will, they could exploit the limited degrees of freedom still available under conditions of globalisation to protect the interests of vulnerable citizens. (Randeria 2007: 28)

Randeria’s attempts to incorporate issues of caste and caste mobilisation in civil society have ended up, however, celebrating legal pluralism and marginalising the role of the state (Randeria 2002). Similarly, Ganguly (2000) observes that structures of governmentality and Indian democracy make Dalits virtually inarticulate. My study cautions against such conclusions. Dalit politics in India poses a critical challenge to scholars theorising politics and resistance at the margins. The politics of Dalits does not fit neatly into the culturalist critique where state and associated politics are seen as the imposition of modernist ideas from above. Dalit politics on the margins of the state seems to demand more state intervention (Guru 2009). For Dalits, the state is a pool of resources and opportunities and they are eager to (mis)use the government administration (Fuller and Harriss 2001). The politics at the margins is not anti-politics but counter-politics: a response to and not a rejection of the state (Spencer 2007).

Under globalisation and the emergence of new civil society spaces, Dalit movement politics continue to revolve around both state and non-political spheres through the formation of politicised collective identities of protest. Caste does not necessarily work against class in Dalit movements. Dalits movements mobilise for change processes that are not merely ones of recognition; redistribution concerns are also involved. Identity politics does not have an inevitable logic that destines it to fracturing, border patrolling and internal conservatism. Indeed, redistribution claims may require identity politics (Alcoff 2007). Further undoing of caste status and privileges is a contentious process and involves more

than rational deliberations as Dalits face ritualised and 'spontaneous' forms of political violence.

Within this broader context, my anthropological research is an enquiry into Dalit struggles and politics for decent civil behaviour and human dignity vis-à-vis the processes of making society 'civil'. I unravel these processes specifically through Dalit assertion in public spaces, the formation of collective identities of protest, Dalit participation in electoral politics and the rise of NGOs in Dalit politics. Through pursuing an ethnography of Dalit politics, I present the constant engagement of Dalits with caste and the state and the role of Dalit movements in the making and workings of civility and civil society in India.

The MHA and BSP are ethnographically explored here to understand the dialectical relationship between the Dalits, Dalit movements, the state and non-Dalits so as to include an analysis of political culture and political economy and also to critically appraise the formation and functioning of collective identities—both jati and Dalit (or Bahujan)—in Dalit politics and civil society at large. In pursuing the anthropology of Dalit politics, this book moves beyond a village study framework to follow the dynamism of Dalit politics in its external contexts and networks. It also transcends the emphasis on the ritual and symbolic in the study of caste and comprehends the dynamism of caste in its interaction with modern politics. Finally, the book provides insights into alternative politics and political culture that Dalits seek to construct and the challenges they face in the making of civil society.



## 2

### Dalit Movements in the Post-Panther Period

#### Contextualising the BSP and MHA in Marathwada

In the previous chapter, I emphasised the study of civil society processes through caste and Dalit politics and described the blurring of sociocultural and political boundaries in Dalit attempts to transcend subalternity under Ambedkar. The ideology and politics of Ambedkar created a mass of Dalits that was highly politicised. Ambedkar died in 1956 after his conversion to Buddhism, ‘only to be reborn some twenty years later’, according to Chatterjee (2004: 24), ‘as the prophet of Dalit liberation’. However, identification of Ambedkar as ‘prophet’ to follow Chatterjee’s idiom amongst the Mahars of Maharashtra was a process that had set in much before his death.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter is a brief review of the post-Ambedkar deepening of Dalit politics in Maharashtra and proceeds as follows: First, I provide an overview of the history of Dalit politics in Maharashtra and argue that Dalit movements have not reached an impasse as suggested by some scholars (Guru 2004, Omvedt 2001, Deshpande 2004b, Teltumbde 2010). While the movement has thickened in non-party politics, there has also been a recovery in party politics since the mid-1990s with the growth of the BSP. This discussion is followed by introduction to the two critical cases

<sup>1</sup>See Moon’s (2001) autobiography which has detailed insights into the political and philosophical bond that lay Mahars developed with Ambedkar.

of my ethnographic study—the BSP and MHA which are representative of the growth and changes ensuing in Dalit politics. In the case of the BSP, I chart its ideological and non-party roots in an organisation of government employees (BAMCEF) before demonstrating how Kanshiram's new vision of politics made 'party' politics central to the BSP and its ideology. Finally, I present the case of MHA, a movement organisation that builds on NGOs to strengthen Dalit assertion, particularly amongst Mangs.

In conclusion, I summarise the context of Dalit politics in Maharashtra and highlight the marginal locations of the Dalit party and non-party actors who together constitute the Dalit politics of protest. Despite their marginal place, Dalit movements challenge and reform the state and civil society through innovative strategies which are discussed in the following chapters.

Post-Ambedkar Dalit politics in Maharashtra suffered from the immediate shock of losing its leader. Miller (1967) notes the lack of direction within the Mahar community, especially within the Buddhist movement after his death. Ambedkar, however, continued to be a political icon of protest and all that he had touched or done became sacred for his followers, who even regarded the Constitution of India as 'sacred' because it was 'written' by him. Various protest groups and local associations that merged political and cultural activities emerged to pursue the task of politicising Dalits. Through interpreting and following Ambedkar in different ways, Dalit movements pursued strategies which included criticism of the Hindu religion, pursuing education and motivating untouchables to abandon Hinduism (through conversions to Buddhism), stigmatised occupations (village/caste economy) and corrupt politics (Congress).

These movements grew too strong to be stalled by the loss of their leader and, though factionalised in Maharashtra, Dalit politics continues to spread at the grassroots in the post-Ambedkar phase. I categorise this growth process into three broad phases: First, the expansion and splintering of the RPI in the period until the early 1970s; second, the growth and decline of the Dalit Panthers (DP) until mid-1980s; and finally the post-DP phase. In this chapter, I briefly provide an overview of the first two phases and then move on to discuss in detail the third phase which has seen a growth of diverse localised collectives and also major political parties in Dalit politics. It is in this phase that I situate the BSP and MHA. First though I address the vexed question of whether Dalit politics in the state have stalled or not.

## Have Dalit Movements in Maharashtra Reached an Impasse?

Dalit movements in Maharashtra attracted the attention of various scholars due to large scale politicisation of Mahars who converted to Buddhism following Ambedkar's call. The growth of RPI and its fragmentation was followed with the rise of the DPs. The fragmentation of the DPs and the simultaneous rise of Hindutva politics led scholars sceptical about the future and potential of Dalit movements to point to an impasse. Scholars tend to deploy dichotomies like party politics against sociocultural mobilisation (Wankhede 2008), jati politics against anti-caste politics (Omvedt 2001), NGOs against Dalit politics (Teltumbde 2010), globalisation against Dalits (Guru 2004) and the symbolic against the material (Deshpande 2004b). These studies suggest that Dalit movements have reached an impasse in Maharashtra in the post-Panther period. The impasse is critically explored both in the contours of ideology and praxis in Dalit movements of Maharashtra. For example, Gokhale (1986) argues that the ideological change of conversions amongst Mahars instead of collectivising the Dalits separated the Mahars from other Dalit castes. Gupta's (1979) class lens analyses Mahar assertion for symbolic space in the *Namantar* movement as a case of Mahar 'class' dominance. Commenting on the fragmented nature of Dalit politics and its limited negotiating power, Palshikar (2007) emphasises the competition between Mahars and non-Mahars that acts as a deterrent to effective Dalit politics. For him, the fragmentation of Dalit politics has resulted in its absorption into bourgeois politics. The affinity of Dalit politics to electoral politics is argued to have made the category of Dalit (both identity and ideology) amenable to the pressures of numbers and alliances. Deshpande (2004b), thus, argues that Dalit movements form conservative alliances and remain concerned only with symbolic issues which throw them into crisis. The emphasis on 'party' politics and backtracking from the 'socio-cultural' issues, leads to a politics of compromise and not the annihilation of caste. Wankhede (2008: 57), thus, maintains that 'Post-Ambedkar Dalit movements by not giving the needed importance to the sociopolitical and cultural notions of Buddhism have developed a strategy that is limited to the issues of political democracy'. In current neo-liberal times, Dalit politics is viewed as antithetical to radical politics and NGOs—as means of de-politicisation—offer soft resistance to the states' neo-liberal agenda (Gopal Guru and Chakravarty 2005). Omvedt (2001) emphasises

the failure of the Dalit movements in their consolidation of jati politics, thus, failing to evolve an alternative agenda of development.

One of the major shortcomings of the above analyses is in their focus on macro-social movements. They remain insufficiently attuned to grassroots initiatives and fail to capture both the dialectic relationship between grassroots movements and macro political movements within the broader context and the dynamic nature of caste inequality. Therefore, these analyses render parts of the complex processes and daily workings of Dalit movements invisible. Contrary to these macro-level analyses, I argue that Dalit politics has grown both in the arenas of party politics and in non-party spaces. The post-Panther phase of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra is characterised by growth of diverse localised collectives, movements and organisations that coordinate and associate with Dalit and non-Dalit political parties and carry out daily struggles for survival with dignity. These movements are varied in nature, protesting sociopolitical and economic issues that affect the Dalits on a daily basis. Further on, I detail the process of this growth that has occurred in Dalit politics and ideologies in spite of factionalism.

## **From the Factionalism of the RPI to the Panther Radicalism**

The scholars cited above are right in noting the fragmentation that the Dalit movements faced; however, the fragments also continued to unite in non-party political fields. The rise of factions has not meant that these organisations ceased to raise Dalit issues and efforts to unite the factions have been continuous.

### ***Formation and Splits in the RPI***

Towards the end of his life, Ambedkar initiated two political processes: conversions to Buddhism and the formation of the Republican Party. Omvedt (2001) calls these a spiritual force and a political platform, respectively. The merger of the sociocultural and the political in Dalit politics continued in the post-Ambedkar phase. The RPI came to be an important Dalit political force dominated by Mahars in Maharashtra and many local social organisations and groups worked on spreading

Buddhism amongst Dalits. These party and non-party processes did not exist independently; rather, they grew in interaction. The political parties, however, remained fickle, due to their regular assimilation (and annihilation) in mainstream politics. The non-party movements on the other hand, continued to disperse and grow through processes like production and distribution of Dalit literature, protests and rise of commemorative politics around the prophet-like symbol of Ambedkar.

The post-Ambedkar period in Maharashtra also included the rise of linguistic nationalism and mobilisation of multiple political forces under the *Samyukta* Maharashtra (United Maharashtra) Movement, which consolidated the political boundaries of Maharashtra on a linguistic basis. The RPI also played a part in this. After the formation of Maharashtra state on a linguistic basis, the RPI was relocated to the margins as language became an ideology and collective identity, rendering 'caste' marginal within the macro politics of Maharashtra. Large masses of Dalits continued to remain socially, economically and politically marginalised and the newly independent nation-state followed by the linguistically defined regional state offered little hope to them. The marginalisation of caste in the macro politics of Maharashtra was coupled with political and economic consolidation by dominant Marathas. Though fractured, they tilted the new political economy in their favour: They dominated state politics, controlled the state aided education sector and controlled the rural cooperative economy (credit societies and sugar industries), making the most of the new agrarian and industrial policies (Rosenthal 1974, Dahiwale 1995). They, thus, consolidated their dominance throughout Maharashtra turning it into what Vora (2009) has called the *Maratha rashtra* (nation).

The idea of the RPI was conceived in 1956 by Ambedkar and it was formally organised in October 1957 after his death. Shortly after its formation, the RPI was faced with the problem of factions: The first split came about in 1958 (led by B.C. Kamble and Dadasaheb Rupwate) alleging the domination of Communists and marginalisation of Dalits in *Samyukta* Maharashtra Samiti; the second split came about in 1967 as Y.B. Chavan, the veteran Maratha leader wooed RPI leaders into Congress. The anti-Congress ideology that Ambedkar had carved out through his critique of Gandhi and Gandhian nationalism could not survive for long as factions of the RPI continued to be co-opted. Dadasaheb Gaikwad, a key leader of the RPI, however, shifted to extra-parliamentary methods and massive protests demanding land for the landless were held

between 1953 to 1966 in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh under the RPI faction he led (Zelliot 1996, Omvedt 2001). This, again, demonstrates the interplay between institutional and extra-institutional methods in the Dalit movement.

### ***The Rise and Fall of the DP***

The 1970s, thus, witnessed the resurgence of a Dalit assertion which was dualistic in nature, creating disturbances in political and mainstream literary circles. Disgruntled by the compromising politics of the RPI leaders, Dalit youth from the Bombay slums formed the Dalit Panthers in 1972, inspired by the Black Panther Movement in the United States. This was also the time when the word Dalit gained much currency. The Panthers called themselves 'Dalit', meaning downtrodden or ground down, because it was a casteless term that both acknowledged and challenged their history of caste oppression and 'Panthers' because 'they were supposed to fight for their rights like panthers, and not get suppressed by the strength and might of their oppressors' (Murugkar 1991: 64). The Panthers equated Congress rule with Hindu feudalism and attacked the RPI for its corrupt politics. Power, wealth, landlords, capitalists and moneylenders were seen as enemies of Dalits. The DPs distinguished themselves by openly advocating violence for violence, raising class issues and bringing in revolutionary Dalit literature that attacked Brahmanic (Hindu) cultural hegemony, which contributed to consolidating Dalit identity further.<sup>2</sup> The DPs made a formidable contribution to raising revolutionary consciousness amongst the Dalits, however, infighting and splintering weakened it considerably. The DP movement carried in it the tension between Buddhist (peace) and Socialist (violence) as approaches to emancipatory politics, which led to a split in 1974 (Contursi 1993). The DPs were further factionalised by personality clashes and competition within the leadership. Omvedt (2001) suggests that although the DPs pursued radical politics, they failed to envisage a

<sup>2</sup>See Punalekar (2001) on Dalit literature and identity formation, Murgurkar (1991) for a comprehensive study of rise and fall of Dalit Panthers, Gokhale (1979) on the radical politics of Dalit Panthers and Contursi (1993) for her empirical study of Bharatiya Dalit Panther (a faction of the divided Panthers with Buddhist leaning).

socio-economic programme for the new society and Murgurkar (1991) attributes this to failed leadership.

Nevertheless, even the factionalised DP remained a formidable power against the Shiv Sena (SHS)<sup>3</sup> during the riots of 1978, after Marathwada University was renamed after Ambedkar (Contursi 1993). After the split of 1974, some Panthers united and continued the DP movement under the leadership of Prof. Arun Kamble, Ramdas Athawale and Gangadhar Gade in Maharashtra (Paswan and Jaideva 2002: 326).

While the DPs criticised the docility and compromising politics of the RPI leaders and initially boycotted elections, they found it difficult to stay aloof from party politics. Some later leaders such as Ramdas Athawale were accommodated in Congress through an alliance with factions of RPI. The DP's distrust in electoral politics could not take root amongst all its leaders, however, their non-party, radical mobilisation partially institutionalised the collective performance of anger/violence by Dalits as a necessary Dalit response to caste atrocities and other stigmatised exclusions of Dalits. The reliance on electoral politics continued to form a central constituent of Dalit politics for most Dalit formations, including the DP. The intersection of non-party political formations and party-political formations has remained at the core of Dalit politics. This contributes to an ambiguous relationship of Dalit politics with the state, where there is both trust (in the Constitution) and distrust (because of the upper caste dominance in the state).

In the realm of party politics there were regular efforts to unite the RPI factions. In 1989, students went on a fast until death demanding unity of the republican parties that forced the leaders to come together for a while (Morkhandikar 1990). However, these efforts had limited success and the splintering of the RPI continued. For instance, in 1999, the election commission was concerned over which faction was to be allotted the RPI election symbol of the rising sun (Mhasawade 1999) and currently,

<sup>3</sup>Shiv Sena grew stronger in rural areas of Marathwada evoking Maratha emotions against Dalit encroachment of *gaairan* lands and against the Dalit demand to rename Marathwada University making violent conflicts against Dalits, a regular sight in Marathwada. The coalition of BJP-SS, formed in 1989, further combined the Hindutva and anti-Dalit forces. The decision to rename Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in 1994 by the Congress (under the pressure of RPI factions) led to Maratha rage against Congress. This helped BJP-SS gain power in 1995 with strong Maratha support.

the RPI has more than ten factions. Some leaders of the RPI factions are accommodated on and off in the Congress/NCP<sup>4</sup> through paternalistic alliances. Another important political party among the RPI factions is Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh (BBM) led by Prakash Ambedkar (grandson of Dr Ambedkar), which has a good presence in Vidarbha, particularly Akola District. Prakash Ambedkar has striven to create broad-based support for BBM by moving beyond Dalits (Gavaskar 1994). Workers of the BBM are also part of Boudha Mahasangh, a Buddhist organisation that works on propagating Buddhism amongst Dalits.

While the factionalism within RPI may present a sorry picture of Dalit party politics in terms of performance in elections, they have retained their cultural roots and continue the politics of commemoration and propagation of Buddhism. The arrival of the BSP in Maharashtra has seen a return to autonomous and assertive Dalit mobilisation in the arena of party politics. The BSP has a dominant presence of Mahars most of whom have moved to the BSP from the factions of RPI, however, the BSP also has a good presence of non-Mahar Dalits in the party organisation. While Ambedkar being a Mahar helped attract Mahars to Ambedkarite ideology, it had also affected Ambedkar's efforts of enrolling non-Mahar untouchables in Dalit politics, a trend that continues till date. The growth of the BSP hints at the possibility of the consolidation of Dalits as a political community through the consolidation and politicisation of non-Mahar Dalit castes, particularly the Mangs and Chambar.

### ***Dalit Politics beyond Mahars: Mang and Chambar Consolidation***

The frontiers of Dalit politics also moved beyond Mahar dominance in the 1980s with independent mobilisation and politicisation amongst the Mangs, the second most numerical SCs in Maharashtra after the Mahars. Key amongst the non-party formations was Akhil Bhartiya Matang

<sup>4</sup> The NCP was formed in 1999 and has its roots in Maratha dissidence within Congress. The dominance of Congress in the politics of Maharashtra was absolute between 1957 and 1977 and the real political competition in the state was confined to factions within the Congress (Palshikar and Birmal 2004). Maratha elite dissension against the Delhi (Gandhi family) control of Congress exacerbated in the 1970s, when Indira Gandhi attempted to undo the hegemony of the Maratha leadership.



Sangh (All India Matang Organisation, ABMS) under the leadership of Dr Babasaheb<sup>5</sup> Ghopale who organised the Mangs. Ghopale managed to establish a separate political identity for Mangs as Matangs (a sanskritised term) through grassroots mobilisation against traditional practices like *potraj*<sup>6</sup> and economic deprivation. Following a twenty-six-day fast in Mumbai which he undertook, a separate development corporation for Mangs was approved by the government and the Lokshahir Annabhau Sathe Development Corporation (LASDC) was established in 1985. Another important demand ABMS mobilised for was the allotment of 8 per cent separate reservations for Mangs within the SC quota. This demand received some attention from the state government in 2003 which formed the Lahuji Salave<sup>7</sup> Commission to study the socio-economic status of Mangs in Maharashtra. Ghopale was also accommodated within the state apparatus by making him the chairman of LASDC. Various other Mang organisations such as the Dalit Maha Sangh (Dalit Great Organisation, led by Machindra Sakte, a lecturer), Bahujan Rayat Parishad (Bahujan and Peasant Conference, formed by Dhobale, a NCP political leader) and Lahuji Sena (Lahuji's Army, visible in the Mumbai region led by Reddy) and political parties like the Democratic Party of India (DPI) and Bahujan Majoor Paksha (Bahujan Labour Party) that advocate equality for Mangs have emerged over time. Since the early 1990s, one particular organisation in Marathwada, MHA, has emerged as an important Mang sociopolitical organisation.

While some mobilisation amongst Mang groups is a product of anti-Mahar sentiments, not all pursue such an agenda. The term 'Dalit' is not

<sup>5</sup>Ghopale does not hold a doctorate or medicine degree. With the growth of his political clout amongst the Mangs, 'Dr' and 'Babasaheb' were eventually added to his name making him the 'Babasaheb' of Mangs.

<sup>6</sup>In Maharashtra, 'Mari-aa' or Laxmi-aa are symbolic of the virgin *gramdevata* (village goddesses) and the *potraj* belonging to Mahar or Mang caste is the official worshipper. The *potraj* wears feminine attire (a long skirt) haldi-kumkum, green bangles and leaves his long hair loose on the back' (Rege 1995: 231). The practice of *potraj* are referred to as *potrajki* and are most criticised by the activist in public discourses for being a practice which turns a masculine Mang man into helpless feminine individual who has to beg for his living.

<sup>7</sup> Lahuji Buwa Vastad was a Mang who ran a gymnasium in Pune in the mid-nineteenth century. He imparted physical training to revolutionaries such as Phule and Vasudev Balwant Phadke. Lahuji Buwa assisted Phule in his attempts to gather untouchable children and make them attend school (Paik 2007: 184).

totally rejected and Ambedkarism is pursued as a political ideology by some of these groups, alongside the politicisation and consolidation of Mang identity. For example, Machindra Sakte of the Dalit Maha Sang and Sukumar Kamble of DPI are known for their critique of Hindutva mobilisation and some exceptional Mang leaders have also converted to Buddhism.

Mangs, thus, are part of Dalit politics despite Mahar domination, but the Chambar have largely remained outside the purview of Dalit politics. In Maharashtra, the comparatively pure and higher status of Chambar, compared to Mahars and Mangs, was made use of by SS who portrayed itself as the protector of 'non-Dalit' SCs (Morkhandikar 1990), to accommodate Dalits who were Hindus and not Ambedkarites or Buddhists. Vicziany (2002) observes that the SS's strategic response to the BSP threat was 'to foster the establishment of the Maharashtra Charkar Sangh [MCS]', a social organisation under the leadership of Babanrao Gholap, a Chambar political leader of SS. Within Chambar, there are other non-political organisations that resist the strong influence of SS and the BJP, such as Guru Ravidas Samata Parishad (Guru Ravidas Equality Conference) and Guru Ravidas Satyashodhak Sanghatan (Guru Ravidas Satyashodhak Organisation) in Marathwada, which mobilise opinion in favour of Dalit identity and the BSP.

Those Dalit non-party organisations that have grown in political clout and performance are also necessary sites of accommodative aggregation for mainstream political parties such as the Congress/NCP and BJP-SS. Non-party political organisations are also formed by Dalit leaders of mainstream political parties to serve the interests of these parties. The SS to capitalise on the differences between Mahars and Chambar promoted MCS, similarly Bahujan Rayat Parishad (Bahujan Peasant Conference), a Mang organisation serves the interests of the NCP.

### ***The Paradox of Political Co-optation, Thriving Dalit Politics and Political Violence***

Dalit movements, though fractured, continue to play a vital role in the democratic politics and processes making society civil in Maharashtra. While some of the Dalit political parties and leaders were co-opted within the non-Dalit mainstream parties, Dalit non-party organisations and movements did not succumb to the failure in party politics. The politicisation of Dalits is a process that has continued in the post-Panther

period. 'Ambedkar' entered villages, small towns and slums in multiple symbolic forms as a saviour, prophet, symbol of protest, Constitution and Buddhism which all contested the hierarchic boundaries of caste in public spaces. Various non-party political organisations worked on spreading Ambedkarite politics and ideology beyond Dalits. For instance, some factions of BAMCEF and others such as Boudha Mahasangh continue to form vibrant non-party organisations in Dalit politics, holding mass awareness meetings and producing movement literature and a culture of volunteerism in Dalit politics. In 2007, around one lakh Dalits and other lower tribes converted to Buddhism to mark fifty years of Ambedkar's conversions to Buddhism (Bavadam 2007).

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and the Panther radicalism gave rise to various localised groups of educated youth who mobilised to demarcate the Dalit-Buddhist boundaries as against those of Hindus. The rise of Dalit politics in Maharashtra despite its factionalism is also a function of the intertwining of culture and politics in Ambedkar's schema where conversions to Buddhism and party politics were both important in turning the politics of protest into a culture. Dalit politics, thus, has deepened over the years also due to pressures from below, where Dalits become Ambedkarised by reading and listening about Ambedkar in rallies organised by numerous organisations.

Dalit cultural-political assertion and simultaneous consolidation of commemorative political symbolism in Dalit politics also resulted in increased political violence against Dalits. The interlinked economic, sociopolitical and religious landscapes in Maharashtra, particularly Marathwada, sustain the dominance of the Marathas and have been a site for regular and sustained conflicts where the dominant castes and the Dalits from their marginalised locations engage in manoeuvring and violence. Dalits too participate in performing violence, or what Jaoul (2008) terms 'righteous anger'.

Violence against Dalits coexists with Dalit assertion. Maharashtra has seen a steep rise in cases of caste violence against Dalits and also the registration of such cases under pressure from Dalit movements. The number of cases registered under SC, ST (Prevention of Atrocities Act) have increased from 689 in 2004, to 844 in 2005 and 1,173 in 2008 (Sonawane 2010). The politicisation of Dalits and political and ritual violence against Dalits are thus parallel processes.

Like the non-party arena, Dalit resistance in party politics continues in the presence of assertive organisations that criticise dominant mainstream political parties and the state. BSP and BBM have more particularly

sustained the critique of compromises that Dalit leaders make in party politics.

Post-Panther Dalit politics is thus marked by mobilisation in socio-cultural and electoral fields and their intersections. The BSP and MHA are two critical cases that best represent the fractured geographies of Dalit politics in the post-DP phase because of their varied organisational forms, main constituent castes, strategies of mobilisation and possible empowering impact on Dalits. The outcomes of these organisations are not limited to Dalits alone and have a profound impact on the norms of trust and civility in a village caste context.

The BSP represents the homogenising current within Dalit movements. It also attempts to 'go beyond' the identity of Dalit as an oppressed category in an effort to establish a new collective identity of 'Bahujan'. The political strategies of BSP revolve around the belief that they can bring about change from above through securing political power. In the context of Dalit movements in Maharashtra that are largely dominated by Mahars, MHA represents an interesting case of grassroots Dalit politics with an NGO face and global civil society intersections, largely representing Dalit interests with a focus on Mangs. The MHA is a Dalit Movement that includes NGOs and a critical site for studying intersections of the local and the global in the civil society arena. In the following section, I will present the rise of BSP in Maharashtra and its meanings in Marathwada through ethnographic material. I will then turn to describing the formation and growth of MHA and the vernacularisation of NGOs in MHA's politics.

## **BSP in Maharashtra**

The BSP's growth in Maharashtra, despite the presence of various Dalit parties, is interesting to note as it marks a departure from the impasse that Dalit *party* politics had reached. The BSP's performance in Maharashtra cannot be compared to Uttar Pradesh (UP) where it came to power with full majority within twenty three years of its formation. The socio-political context in Maharashtra is different from UP primarily in the numerical marginality of Dalits. While in UP, Dalits constitute around 21 per cent of the total population, in Maharashtra the average population of Dalits stands at 10.2 per cent. It is not surprising, therefore, that BSP has not won a single seat in Maharashtra either in the Lok Sabha or in

the Vidhan Sabha since its formation. The BSP has however grown as a major Dalit political party in Maharashtra over the years, marginalising the factions of the RPI (Jha 2006).

**Table 2.1:**  
*BSP's Vote Percentage in Maharashtra*

|              | <i>(Lok Sabha and Vidhan Elections)<sup>8</sup></i> |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |
|--------------|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|              | <i>1990</i>   | <i>1991</i> | <i>1995</i> | <i>1996</i> | <i>1998</i> | <i>1999</i> | <i>2004</i> | <i>2009</i> |
| Vidhan Sabha | 0.98  | —           | 1.49        | —           | —           | 0.29        | 4.00        | 2.35        |
| Lok Sabha    | —   | 0.48        | —           | 0.29        | 0.75        | .32         | 3.05        | 4.83        |

While other Dalit parties have declined, the BSP has managed to emerge as the single largest Dalit political party in terms of vote percentage in Maharashtra (Jha 2006, Maitra 2012). In the 2004 and 2009 Lok Sabha elections, besides emerging third in various constituencies, the BSP spoiled the chances of various BJP and Congress candidates in Vidarbha and Marathwada (Sainath 2004, Gaikwad 2009). Eastern Vidarbha and Marathwada have a visible presence of BSP, where it polled 11.4 per cent and 6.1 per cent of the vote, respectively, in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. In 2009, the BSP polled more than 10 per cent votes in five constituencies of which three were in Vidharbha (Wardha, Nagpur and Gadchiroli) and two in Marathwada (Hingoli and Nanded). These figures tell us about the growing visible presence of BSP in Maharashtra's politics despite not forging alliances with any political party. The BSP, however, faces competition from various other Dalit political parties. Further on, I will elaborate upon BSP's specificities.

### ***How BSP Claims to Be Different?***

The social structure of India is based on inequalities created by caste system and the movement of the Party shall be geared towards changing the social system and rebuilding it on the basis of equality and human values. (Constitution of BSP: 5)

To eliminate caste you must take note of caste [...] Caste is a two-edged sword, it cuts both ways. It cuts one way and it can also cut the other way

<sup>8</sup>All figures are from Statistical Reports of Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections published by Election Commission of India.

when you use it in the opposite direction. I decided to handle caste to our benefit and deprive the Brahmins of its benefit. (Kanshiram cited in Mane 2006: 251)

The above two quotes reveal the dynamic nature of BSP's politics. While the first one casts BSP as a 'party of ideology', the second exposes it as spoils faction with conservative interests. Sartori and Mair (2005: 67–68) makes this distinction between parties of ideology and the spoils faction to distinguish between those which are principled and those that function as mechanisms for settling a bargain between two or more parties. The distinction of ideology and spoils faction is blurred not only in the practice of BSP but more generally in Dalit politics in Maharashtra. The BSP's success also lies in making 'party politics' and the securing of 'political power' central to achieving its ideological goals: seeking political power has become part of achieving what is termed the 'Ambedkarite mission'. Therefore, my approach here is not to evaluate the performance of the BSP in elections, but to map its growth and meaning through analysis of movement practices and narratives of participants since the formation of BAMCEF and later the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4 [Dalit and other Exploited Groups Struggle Committee]).

One of the major limitations of Dalit politics in the 1990s in Maharashtra, as suggested by Morkhandikar (1990), was its inability to move beyond Dalit identity. Similarly, Palshikar (2007) more recently emphasised that the competition between Mahars and non-Mahars acts as a deterrent to Dalit politics. However, more than the Mahar-Mang-Chambar fragmentation it is the internal Mahar fragmentation that affects Dalit politics in Maharashtra. Kanshiram's political strategy, since its incipient stage, had been to construct a broad political community on an ideological basis so as to unite OBCs and religious minorities (low-caste converts) with Dalits at its core.

Kanshiram, though a non-Maharashtrian and non-Mahar, ventured into Ambedkarite activism in 1964 while working in a government job in Pune. Stories of Kanshiram being influenced by reading Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* and of his anger against the upper caste officers, who cancelled the leave of a Mahar colleague wanting to celebrate Ambedkar *jayanti* (anniversary), are common amongst the committed cadre I met. It is said that it was these important events that led to Kanshiram renouncing his job and family for the Ambedkarite *mission*. By committed cadre, I refer to those workers who have not moved out of the BSP despite its dismal performances in some elections. They referred to the BSP as a social movement and not a political party, thus designating

political power as secondary to the BSP's mission. The word 'mission' is commonly used amongst the cadre, but their understanding of their mission was not always coherently articulated, most implied that the mission was achieving Buddhist India (*Bauddhamai Bharat*) or the India of Samrat Ashoka's dreams.<sup>9</sup> The mobilisation around this mission reached initially to cities and some small towns in Marathwada through the formation and strengthening of BAMCEF.

### ***Dalit Elite in Dalit Politics: BAMCEF in the Making of BSP***

After working for RPI and getting disillusioned with its compromising alliances with Congress, Kanshiram formed the All India SC, ST, OBC and Minority Employees Association in 1971. This organisation later became BAMCEF in 1978. The BAMCEF gained a visible presence in Marathwada. It was conceived as a non-political, non-religious and non-agitational organisation that appealed to the conscience of the educated amongst the SC/ST, OBC and Minorities to join the Ambedkartie mission. The BAMCEF appealed to the class amongst the Dalits that was comparatively well-off, mostly based in urban areas and small towns working as government servants and partially alienated from their deprived untouchable identities. Kanshiram (1981[2006]) in a booklet titled *BAMCEF—An Introduction*, asks this elite section of Dalits to get ready to face the humiliation and losses that would come their way in pursuing the interests of the community.

In Marathwada, cadre camps (as they are referred to locally) and weekly magazines such as Bahujan Nayak published from Nagpur, were important means of communicating Dalit ideology and culture in BAMCEF. Some elderly members of the BSP that I met still retained the older issues of publications such as Bahujan Sanghatak (Hindi) and Bahujan Nayak (Marathi) from as early as 1980. Kanshiram started various magazines in Hindi and English and often wrote editorials for these publications. Manohar Atey (1997), who published the editorials of Kanshiram, described him as a practical philosopher. I met some older members of BAMCEF who had resigned from their government jobs to emulate Kanshiram's selflessness and was told about various others who had made similar sacrifices. Although its membership was mainly made up of government employees, BAMCEF was not conceived as an institution

<sup>9</sup>See Jaoul (2007) for what he terms the Buddhist Avatar of BAMCEF in UP.

for the welfare of government employees. It instead aimed to mobilise the resources, time and knowledge of SC/ST and OBC employees, for the liberation (mukti) of the exploited social groups that they belonged to (Ram 1982). BAMCEF had wings that emphasised self-help, such as the BAMCEF Volunteer Force (BVF), Brotherhood Centre and Buddhist Research Centre (which was added in 1981). The Brotherhood Centre was supposed to be involved in community awareness activities and in supporting needy students amongst the Dalits. Elder members would speak about the spirit of volunteerism in BAMCEF members where even Class I officers cleaned up after meetings alongside Class IV employees and BVF members.

In the annual gatherings of BAMCEF, scholars (like Gail Omvedt and Raoasheb Kasabe) were called to address the members. Similarly, in cadre camps at district or taluka level, local scholars and members of BAMCEF conducted cadre training on Bahujan history. Following Phule, the Bahujans (SC/ST/OBC and minorities) were imagined as indigenous communities that were exploited by the invading Aryans. Seminars were also organised to discuss challenges for the success of the Ambedkarite movement nationally (Mane 2006). Pen and paper were provided to participants to take notes in such meetings, a practice that continues till date in the cadre camps of the party.

The BAMCEF, however, was an organisation of government employees who could not engage in political action as that would mean risking their government jobs. They were instead mobilised through movement narratives of ‘pay back’ to the deprived communities that they came from in the form of ‘time, money and brain (knowledge)’. This support continued for the later political struggles that Kanshiram planned. DS4 was formed in 1982 to pursue politics of protest and also to test grounds in electoral politics. After the formation of DS4, BAMCEF came to be a shadow organisation and its members now continued to mobilise resources for DS4 and later for BSP.

### ***The Strategy of ‘Limited Political Action’ and the Formation of the DS4***

Members of the DS4 remember it being conceived as a means of pursuing the strategy for ‘limited political action’. After the formation of the DS4 on 6 December 1981, mass mobilisation became a strategy. The DS4 and BAMCEF workers worked together with the DS4 workers to



the fore and BAMCEF workers in the shadows. The BAMCEF members too would travel to distant villages and towns where they felt they could make a difference and consolidate support for DS4.

In 1982, when the BAMCEF workers from Majalgaon read the news of D.N. Kambale,<sup>10</sup> from Parbhani District, organising a religious ceremony for a Brahmin priest to perform Munja (sacred thread ceremony) on Mang children, they visited Parbhani to convince him against this move as it was seen as consolidating caste hierarchy. Though D.N. Kambale was not convinced, the BAMCEF workers managed to persuade his nephew D.S. Kambale to join DS4. D.S. Kambale had studied at Milind College in Aurangabad and had been associated with the Dalit Panthers earlier. I asked D.S. Kambale why one would leave a radical group like the Panthers to join the DS4. He explained:

Sure, the panthers were *jahal* (fiery) but they were not *vaicharik* (ideological). Just using verbal abuses (mainly against Hindu gods) and criticising does not help. They were aggressive but not constructive (*rachnatmak*), and they did not have a theory or perspective. I was part of all that abusing (Hindu gods) and the villagers attacked us. We were beaten up and never felt bad about it. There was only anger in the Panthers. It was revenge-driven anger. BAMCEF people were systematic; they had a plan for changing the whole system. (Interview: 29 January 2010)

As can be seen from the above quote while DS4 was an agitation wing, the workers also claimed intellectual depth in their politics due to engagement of educated employees of BAMCEF. Dalits who shifted from the Dalit Panthers and Republican Parties to BAMCEF and DS4 referred to the latter mostly as *vaicharik* or *boudhik* (intellectual). Such 'intellectual' content included use of history in understanding the varna system so as to challenge it. Another activist who had switched from Dalit Panthers to DS4 explained:

The cadre camps explained history from Buddha, Kabir, Phule, Narayana Guru, Periyar, Shahu, Ambedkar to RPI [...] We were taught to make people who would destroy this *samaj vyavastha* (social system) and not

<sup>10</sup>D.N. Kambale was famous locally as he was the first educated Mang from Nizam state who had written a letter to Ambedkar accusing him of being biased towards Mahars (Burra 1986). He was also a Congress (INC) Member of Parliament (MP) from Nanded constituency from 1951 to 1962.

to take up small issues like atrocities [...] In BAMCEF we felt that the *savarnas*<sup>11</sup> did some 'action' [atrocities] and we gave 'reaction' [protests] and reaction resulted in our loss [...] DS4 was set up to promote action not reaction against injustice. (Interview: 25 May 2009)

Atrocities and violence against Dalits related to caste were seen as linked to radical politicisation of Dalits through Panthers. Such radicalism was seen as harmful 'reaction' in DS4 and BAMCEF. While movements such as Panthers performed violent protests and saw violence as a means of communication, workers of BAMCEF considered violent protests of Dalits as mere reactions which would yield no long-term results.

The introduction of the term *chamcha* (stooge) in Dalit politics by Kanshiram marked the departure of DS4 (and later BSP) from its predecessors in Maharashtra. Kanshiram published a historical and analytical reading of Dalit politics called *Chamcha Age* (Ram 1982), which labelled all those Dalit (and backward) politicians serving the interests of dominant upper caste political parties as '*chamchas*' and their supporters as '*chamchas of chamchas*' and radically reiterated the need for political separation from Congress and other upper caste parties. The '*chamchas*' were seen to have sold out the Dalit community to serve their own purposes and Congress interests. The dominant understanding in Dalit politics of Ambedkar winning reserved seats from Gandhi through the Poona Pact in 1932, received a jolt as Kanshiram organised *Poona Pact Dhikkar* rallies (Down with Poona Pact) and published *Chamcha Age* in 1982 to mark fifty years' of Poona pact. The historic Ambedkar-Gandhi clash was reconstructed to explain the sociopolitical exclusion of Dalits and the new era of '*chamchas*'. While historical struggles since Buddha, Kabir, Phule, Shahu and Ambedkar were important, the Poona Pact marked the downfall of the Dalit and Shoshit (Dalit and exploited).

The Poona Pact, for Kanshiram, affected the possibilities of real representation in the democratic procedures for the Dalits and other exploited groups; therefore, they needed to organise to regain political power. This fiery criticism of factors external to the Dalit movement (Gandhi/Congress) and internal to the movement (e.g., the shortcomings of the

<sup>11</sup>*Savarna* means caste Hindus and does not include untouchables who are considered *Avarna* (one not part of varna).

*chamchas*) attracted new entrants to BAMCEF, DS4 and later BSP. The new entrants to the BSP distinguished it from other Dalit organisations in its critique of and antagonism towards Congress (Gandhi). The critique of *chamchas* as internal others has now become part of the ritual political oratory of BSP cadres who use it regularly in their critique of RPI and Dalits affiliated to other parties.

Within Dalit movement circles, the factions of the RPI and the Dalit Panthers saw BAMCEF and the DS4 as an elitist group that did not believe in protests or agitations. They criticised them for being led by a Chambar (Kanshiram as a Chamar from north India) and not Mahar, for having leaders that did not remove their footwear (as sign of respect) while garlanding Ambedkar and for being against *Namantar*. DS4 did not participate in the agitations for *Namantar* and held the position that securing political power was the only answer.

In 1983, the DS4 organised a nationwide mass mobilisation for equality (*samata*) and self-respect (*swabhiman*) through a cycle 'march'. This witnessed a violent reaction from the Dalit Panthers in Marathwada who stoned a gathering in Ambejogai that had assembled to listen to Kanshiram. Kanshiram continued to address the crowd despite a stone hitting the microphone he was using and the cadre rushed to shield him with their bodies. The workers of DS4 were advised by Kanshiram not to resort to violence as a strategy against the Panthers or against non-Dalits.<sup>12</sup> Violence by *savarnas* against Dalits was conceived as a mere symptom of the larger oppressive *varna-vyavastha* (Varna system). The workers of DS4 (and BAMCEF) thus aimed to unite Dalits, OBCs and religious minorities (with an emphasis on low-caste converts) against this social system that oppressed them.

These agitations in the early 1980s attracted more Dalits into its fold, some of whom were disgruntled by the politics of RPI and the factionalism that has riddled the Panthers too. Marathwada, particularly, had seen increased participation from amongst the Dalits and the well-to-do within them besides participating would also provide resources for mobilisation. While retaining the middle classes and lower middle classes within its fold through BAMCEF, DS4 also reached out to the rural Dalits through its mobilisation strategies. For Kanshiram, it was an apt time to initiate the mission of capturing political power and the BSP came into being in 1984.

<sup>12</sup>Based on several informal conversations and some interviews with those who had participated in this rally.

### ***Political Power as the 'Master Key' and the Formation of BSP***

After the experiment of DS4 with the strategy of 'limited political action', the strategy shifted and became oriented towards gaining political power. As a result of this the BSP was formed on 14 April 1984. Some earlier workers that I interviewed had travelled to Delhi for the formation rally of the BSP. Despite being a political party, the BSP came to be viewed as a social movement by its cadres, a movement aiming to capture political power through democratic processes as they believed political power was the 'master key' for social change. The BSP also evolved into an authoritarian structure where Kanshiram was at the helm of affairs and controlled decision-making, but the cadre revered him and his commitment and accepted his authority. They followed all the orders from above as part of the party *shista* (discipline). It is this *shista* of the cadre that distinguishes BSP from other Dalit organisations locally: those who are not disciplined or quit mid-way to join other parties are termed *gaddars* (traitors).<sup>13</sup>

In Marathwada, BSP contested all the seats in the Lok Sabha elections of 1984. An ex-member of BAMCEF and DS4 from Beed who had quit a government job to work for the mission on a full-time basis was the Marathwada 'in-charge' of BSP. Elections were fought in the formative years of BSP by various candidates who were ideologically committed and economically weak, these contests were called sacrificial elections—aimed less at winning than at consolidating Dalit votes. In Beed, an OBC man from the Vanjari [another landowning higher caste that is ranked lower than the Marathas] caste contested as the BSP candidate and polled 6,482 (1.42 per cent) votes, whereas other Lok Sabha constituencies in Marathwada were contested by a Muslim (Hamid Khan), a Mang (D.N. Kambale, was convinced to contest by his nephew) and a Takari (Laxman Gaikwad<sup>14</sup>). All these candidates came from the imagined Bahujan political community. The BSP did not contest the Legislative Assembly polls of Maharashtra that followed in 1985 as Kanshiram decided that BSP would support RPI in Maharashtra. This decision did not go down well with some of the

<sup>13</sup> It is usual for the BSP cadres to use Hindi words. Some cadre trainings too are organised in Hindi.

<sup>14</sup> Laxman Gaikwad was part of the radical Dalit literary circles and the author of well-known *Uchalya*. He came from the Takari caste which was listed as a criminal tribe during colonial rule.

senior leaders of BSP in Maharashtra. Kanshiram's interest in UP and in making Mayawati the first MP of BSP was a cause of envy amongst some local leaders. During the Bijnor by-elections of 1985, Kanshiram demanded money and workers from the people of Maharashtra, failing which he threatened to quit the movement. Some of the senior cadre of BAMCEF/BSP in Maharashtra raised allegations that Kanshiram was having an affair with Mayawati, whilst Kanshiram labelled these rebels as *gaddars*.

While the splintering of BAMCEF had started at national level since the formation of DS4, as some disagreed over the use of political (electoral) means, this became a possibility in Marathwada only in 1985. Sham Tangade, the head of BSP in Marathwada, left the BSP to join another group of BAMCEF (led by Tejinder Jhalli from Punjab) to pursue 'non-political' means. Various BAMCEF factions emerged over time, one of which—linked closely with BSP as a shadow organisation—continued to mobilise resources and volunteers for the BSP.

The interweaving of party and non-party activity remained crucial in the politics of the BSP, even for those who objected to the merger between BAMCEF and the BSP. After working in various factions of BAMCEF, in 2000 Sham Tangade started a political party named the Prabuddha (Enlightened) Republican Party of India. He was very critical of BSP's politics which he maintained reinforced caste and did not lead to its annihilation. On electoral politics, however, he held the view that 'the task of *manav mukti* (human liberation) can be pursued through electoral politics and Ambedkarites should take the lead in this' (Interview: 5 June 2009).

The BAMCEF was not a legally registered body until, in 1987, an opposing group legally registered BAMCEF, thus taking away the legal right to use the name BAMCEF from Kanshiram and BSP. There have been various factions of BAMCEF since then. Important among them in Maharashtra are the factions led by B.D. Borkar, Waman Meshram and Vijay Mankar; all engage in non-electoral politics such as large-scale conscientisation of Dalits and reinforcing Dalit antagonism to mainstream Hindu culture. BSP's BAMCEF exists as an informal body amongst followers of those who remained with Kanshiram. The BAMCEF of the BSP in Beed attracted not just Dalits but also some OBCs (like Vanjari and Mali) and Muslims. Teacher/lecturer members of BAMCEF also encouraged students to join the movement. Similarly, the financial contributions to the party from BAMCEF have continued to flow. Workers in Beed profoundly remember contributing to a one lakh

rupee *thaili* (bag) for the Bijnor elections of 1989 in Uttar Pradesh where Mayawati emerged victorious.

After the success of consolidating the Chamar vote in UP followed by the mobilisation of other castes around Chamars, a discussion in Maharashtra arose on which caste could be the core here. A rift emerged between the Mahars and non-Mahars in the party, with some Dalits suggesting that the leadership be given to OBCs in Maharashtra. Kanshiram, however, was of the view that BSP was a movement and the OBCs were not yet ideologically as inclined as the Dalits. Some OBCs who were part of BAMCEF acknowledged that Kanshiram contributed in making the OBCs aware of their rights. Interestingly, in Beed OBCs were amongst those protesting against the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. An important female Vanjari political leader, who is also an academic, explained, 'they [OBCs] thought that Mahars and Mangs are going to get more reservations through Mandal and joined the Marathas in protest' (Interview: 20 January 2010).

Omvedt (1994) suggests that Kanshiram was the first Dalit to take up the task of organising the OBCs. Various OBC leaders have been attracted to BSP, joined and left the party since its formation. The Mahar prominence within the BSP still continues. A committed cadre from the Mahar caste echoed Kanshiram's words when he told me, '*Mahar Nahin Toh Maharashtra Nahin*' (No Maharashtra without Mahars). There are, however, other SCs and OBCs who form part of the committed cadre in Beed along with the Mahars. The elder workers have taken a back seat and there is a growth of younger workers who appreciate and associate with the politics of BSP with as much commitment as their seniors.

### ***BSP and the New Missionaries in Beed***

The older missionaries have been replaced by younger cadres in Beed most of whom joined BSP in 2002. A major BSP political rally was organised in Kolhapur in 2002 to mark 100 years' of the reservation policies initiated by Shahu Maharaj. This rally, now part of the cadres' collective memory, attracted more youth to the party who have continued to be part of BSP's cadre. Kanshiram's address to the cadres of Maharashtra included a slogan in Marathi which they regularly recall: '*Hou Shakat Aahe*' (it is possible), referring to the possibility of gaining political power in Maharashtra. The possibility of gaining political power through electoral politics, in spite of their small numbers, is something that continues

to drive and motivate the cadres. Kanshiram is now added to the list of *Mahapursh* (great men) of the Bahujan Movement and his writings and speeches, recorded on CDs, are sold widely at movement events. His *jayanti* is also celebrated by the cadre and BAMCEF members by organising discussion sessions. Some Dalits have put pictures of Kanshiram and Mayawati in their homes along with Ambedkar, Phule and Shahu. The BSP related faction of BAMCEF in Beed is still active and is led by a medical doctor who is a faculty member at a Medical College. The cadres of BSP mobilise resources from BAMCEF members, well-wishers and contribute from their own pockets for party purposes. The BSP, thus, thrives on the volunteerism of the cadre, some of whom campaign for the whole day without food or attend meetings with packed lunches as they cannot afford to eat outside their homes.

Competitive factionalism in non-party fields has led to the deepening of Ambedkarite ideology and politics, whereas competitive factions in party politics amongst the Dalits had taken a degenerative turn, leading to an almost disastrous end for Dalit politics. Kanshiram's highly institutionalised, leader dominated form of mobilisation in the BSP is considered by the cadre as an attempt to deal with the challenge of factionalism that pervades other Dalit political parties. Mayawati has now replaced Kanshiram as the absolute head of BSP and the cadres respect her equally. Her 'dictatorship', as reported by the mainstream (*Manuwadi*<sup>15</sup> for cadre) media, is seen as the strength of the party by its cadre.

### ***Patriarchal Movement Structure***

The BSP in Maharashtra does not have a visible presence of women workers in contrast to Uttar Pradesh (Ciotti 2009), and they are particularly absent in leadership roles at the grassroots. There are no specific opportunities or structures to include women within the organisation. The leaders urge the cadre to expand the movement by recruiting new cadres who are educated and can give time and money. This has

<sup>15</sup>Manu refers to the author of *Manusmriti* (ancient Hindu text); Ambedkar had burnt *Manusmriti* in protest of the stigma and lower status it attached to Shudras and Atishudras. Cadre use Manu, *Manuwad* (ism), *Manuwadi* (followers of Manu) interchangeably to emphasise the Brahminic bias of mainstream media, political parties, their leaders and sometime they talk of *Manuwad* amongst Dalits.

translated, in practice, into mostly men being identified as cadres and workers. The new '*bhai-charas*' (literally meaning brotherhoods) are constructed around caste and religious lines and are totally dominated by men. While one sees a visible presence of women participants in rallies and meetings, women in Beed were totally missing in the organisational structure of the BSP.

In one of the BSP cadre meetings, Jadhav, the vice president of BAMCEF in Beed, explained to me the importance of BSP in social change. After listening to him for a while and taking notes, I asked him if BSP was a Bahujan men's movement. Apologetically he replied, 'You have left me *nirottar* (answerless)', but added after a while, 'you must appreciate that the leader of our party is a woman and we are proud of it' (Fieldnotes: 31 January 2009). Local, well-read and ideologically sharp activists of the BSP also link gender discrimination and the exclusion of women from BSP's leadership to the ideology of caste that Manu constructed through *Manuwad* (Manu-ism). One such worker emphasised, 'our slogan is *Nari Ke Sammaan Mein Mayawati Maidan Mein*' (for the respect/honour of women, Mayawati is in the battlefield). He also added an explanation that the historical Buddhist roots of egalitarian gender relations were corrupted due to *Manuwad*: 'Buddhism gave equal respect to women [ ... ] and it is not only Brahmans or Marathas who are *Manuwadi*. There are *Manuwadis* within us too' (Group Interview: 5 March 2009).

The liberation of women is viewed as an essential part of achieving the Ambedkarite mission, but it is neither a priority within BSP nor is it ideologically transmitted to all cadres. Amol (21) is one of the young committed volunteers of BSP who besides pursuing his law degree is also a *dhamma pracharak* (one who spreads Buddha's teachings). He was candid in sharing his assumptions that women's bodies would necessarily corrupt themselves and also the movement. His views reflect the assumptions associated with female bodies that are prevalent in society at large:

A: I am the eldest son in the family, my mother listens to me, and my wife, if I were married, will listen to me too. They will vote for BSP [ ... ] there is no need for women to become leaders [ ... ]

S: Why has Mayawati become the leader then?

A: [ ... ] Mayawati is an exception. Here, there is a lot of importance for *charitrya*, [he translates in English] character. If a woman goes around in public (*char manus*), even if she is a good woman, they say she is not.



And some women in the Dalit movement are not of good *charitrya* [ ... ] because of these four women others do not come out. It is my observation, out of ten women in the movement eight do not behave properly [meant bad *charitrya*]. (Interview: 11 December 2008)

Amol's assumptions about women's bodies, their social roles and the possibilities of corruptibility, also explain the exclusion of women from leadership positions in the BSP in Beed and their forced domestication in the localised contexts of Marathwada. Nevertheless, female supporters of BSP were critical of male party workers who they felt did not give them opportunity to engage actively in the party. These dominant gender attitudes that have been adopted within the party from local social attitudes, are, therefore, not uncontested.

### ***BSP, the State and Democratic Politics***

In this section, I have mapped how the growth of the BSP in non-party spaces contributed to its growth as a political party. The BSP holds a specific political position in Maharashtra that has come to signify Dalit assertion and political separatism. This practice, however, operates in the challenging context of party politics where money and caste overwhelm principled politics. Thus, there exists a tension between the ideal and the substantive, in the actual practice of politics in the BSP. I will explore this tension and the strategies of BSP cadre in more detail in later chapters that focus on use of caste and cultural repertoires of BSP and on the mobilisation during parliamentary elections of 2009.

The BSP workers become most active during the elections; the cadres are mostly discouraged from resorting to protests<sup>16</sup> and are advised to concentrate on conducting cadre camps instead for ideological dissemination and BSP's growth. The case of BSP presents an organised effort, backed by the spirit of its volunteers, to secure political power. They hope to bring social change from above through the sovereign state whose functioning can be controlled by securing political power democratically. Thus, reforming society through the state also requires mobilisation from below for formation of an imagined Ambedkarite/Bahujan political community. The BSP's politics helps us gain an in-depth

<sup>16</sup>The BSP workers do not always follow the orders, especially ones related to protests. See Chapter Seven for Sanju's activism.

understanding of the blurring of the state-civil society boundaries and the claim of Dalits over the state despite being at the margins of society and the state.

The MHA on the other hand, is a movement which resorts to the politics of protest and its workers engage with the daily challenges that Dalits approach them with. MHA has a visible presence of women activists and also has an 'NGO' face to its politics. In the following section, I will present these complex forms of MHA and their intersections.

## **Introducing MHA and Its Civil and Political Identities**

Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan translates in English as 'Human Rights Movement/Campaign'. The MHA is active in Marathwada, more particularly in Beed and has a strong support base amongst the Mangs. Eknath Awad is the charismatic leader and head of MHA. The MHA has two parallel organisational forms: one is of a registered NGO called the Rural Development Centre (RDC) and the other is of MHA as a grassroots Dalit social movement organisation. In the official correspondences of RDC with the INGOs who support it, MHA is referred to as Campaign for Human Rights (CHR). It is however the name Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan and its vernacular practices that are prominent in Beed amongst Dalits, more particularly Mangs. In the following sections I will present here the intersections of RDC-CHR and MHA.

### ***MHA as the Vernacular Face***

Eknath Awad was associated with Dalit activism, particularly Dalit Panthers, since his school days. He pursued education despite coming from a very poor landless Mang family and completed a Masters in Social Work in 1982. After completing his degree in Social Work, he joined as an employee at Vidhayak Sansad, an NGO, working on tribal rights in Thane. Later in 1983, Awad worked with another NGO, the Churches Auxiliaries for Social Action (CASA), as a field officer in Marathwada. While working with CASA, he registered RDC in 1985 under the Societies Registration Act and the Public Trust Act.

Awad continued to be part of the Dalit movement before and after his exposure to the mushrooming NGO sector of the 1980s. He was active in

the Dalit Panthers during his schooling and later became the Majalgaon Taluka president of DS4 and he was the *up-adhyaksha* (vice president) of BAMCEF while he was working with CASA.

Significantly, however, the bylaws of RDC that chart the official objectives do not mention the intention of working on the issue of caste or Dalits. The broad objectives stated in the organisation's documentation include health, education, livelihood and youth development. RDC was, thus, the *associational* cover for Awad's Dalit activism from the mid-80s till early 90s, where he officially focussed on development and *not* on caste issues or Dalits.

The practices of INGOs in early 1990s shifted from charity to human rights and right to development. The INGO also included Dalit issues in the discourse of human rights in international activism (Bob 2007). Locally for RDC, the discursive practice of *Dalit* and *Dalit rights* became part of its procedural practice since the 1990s. This was a result of recognition of Dalit issues in INGO discourses and increasing support extended by INGOs to work on Dalit issues.

The CHR was thus conceived as a people's movement (with INGO support) for securing human rights for Dalits. It was formed on 10 December 1989 to mark International Human Rights Day. The CHR was an NGO-supported movement and some of the earliest activists were provided with financial support in the form of fellowships by INGOs (Holdeen India Programme and Oxfam). Such support was routed through RDC and was coupled with legal training for the activists in legislation that abolished bonded labour, untouchability and caste discrimination/violence. Kamat's (2002) critique of a limited vision of NGOs that revolves around local feudal practices at the cost of capitalist social relations applies to RDC-CHR as CHR was formed as a campaign with NGO support to raise similar issues facing Dalits. The stigmatisation of Dalit bodies and labour was framed under RDC-CHR as one of bonded-labour.<sup>17</sup> The international conventions against bonded labour and the interests of INGOs to support activism challenging these practices were made relevant in the caste context of Marathwada through RDC-CHR.

<sup>17</sup>As discussed in Chapter Three, the land tenure systems under Nizam in Marathwada gave immense power to *Jaagir-dars* constructing a highly feudal economy and society that survived in the post-Nizam period leaving Dalits, particularly, Mangs as landless labourers and *veth begars*.

Paid activists of RDC-CHR raised issues of caste atrocities and *vetth begar* by using the Bonded Labour Abolition Act (1976). While RDC-CHR was started as I/NGO-supported movement, its practices remained vernacular and similar to other Dalit movements. I prefer to speak of MHA, as this was the term used on ground and vernacular practices instead of CHR as used in RDC procedures. The earliest activists who worked on fellowships in RDC-CHR had previously been associated with Dalit Panthers; they thus consolidated vernacular practices of Dalit mobilisation in MHA besides learning some procedures of NGOs. The RDC on the other hand, remained a shadow organisation locally providing resources for the activists. MHA locally developed as a Dalit organisation with Mang prominence under Eknath Awad.

D.R. Jadhav, another founding member of MHA from Mang caste had resigned from his government job to be a part of MHA. Jadhav noted the conscious focus on Mangs in MHA: 'Though in principle we thought of going beyond caste in our work, it was also decided that the focus will be on Mangs who are the most backward within the Dalits' (Interview: 25 April 2009). The main objective of MHA, as conceived by its senior Dalit workers, was to promote *Phule-Ambedkarism*.<sup>18</sup> Caste thus remained at the centre of the formation and mobilisation strategies of MHA.

In the formative years of MHA, this RDC office space was burnt down twice by the Marathas. The MHA's mobilisation against untouchability brought it into conflict with the dominant castes locally (both the Marathas and Vanjaris). The MHA for them came to be known as a Dalit group (like some other Dalit formations) that turns every case of conflict with Dalits (particularly Mangs) into a caste '*atrocitiy*' case, thereby, registering 'false' cases against dominant castes under the SC/ST (PoA) Act.<sup>19</sup> While the state institutions usually suppress assertive Dalit mobilisation, international support to RDC from INGOs has helped merge

<sup>18</sup>The Phule-Ambedkarite ideology and discourses are also referred to as Dalit-Bahujan discourses in academic circles. Rodrigues (2006) identifies the key constituents of Dalit-Bahujan discourse as, 'self-respect, opposition to Brahmanism, own historiography, positive perception to modernity and soft on colonialism, affirmation of political values and rights (includes political and cultural in addition to economic), rejection of the culture of masculinity and religion as morality with no belief in god or salvation'.

<sup>19</sup>See Chapter Three for caste violence, the importance of the atrocity act in Dalit politics and the Maratha angst against protective legislation for Dalits.

MHA development and rights through projects on child rights, gender equity, land rights, livelihoods and Dalit rights.<sup>20</sup>

Overemphasising the role of the RDC-CHR as an NGO would underplay the previous Left and Dalit movement leanings of key Dalit leaders and would also turn a blind eye to the vernacular identities and performances of MHA. Awad seized on INGO funding priorities to legitimise issues that he and other Dalit activists were already engaged in. Caste and land issues, thus, remain at the centre of MHA's politics.

The office of RDC in current times is a small compound which hosts training halls, guest rooms, file rooms and office computers. Awad has an office space here which is similar to a Dalit political party office with pictures of Ambedkar, Shahu, Phule, Annabhau, Savitribai Phule adorning the wall behind Awad's chair. This can be termed as one part of the daily vernacular practice of MHA where Dalits visit Awad with their various grievances. The MHA also has village-level branches in some villages of Beed and other districts of Marathwada. Like other (non-NGO) Dalit organisations, MHA has boards and flags [half blue and half red] erected in village and town public squares. MHA has committees at village, taluka and district levels and members of these committees are active members of the organisation.

### ***The Intersections—Dalitisation of NGO Activism in MHA***

The activists of MHA under Awad's leadership were engaged in challenging untouchability in villages especially through temple entry for Mangs, politicising caste relations and particularly mobilising Mangs. Movement songs were written for MHA by well-known local Dalit movement *shahirs* (ballad singers) such as Vamandada Kardak. These songs included slogans, such as those quoted, which established MHA as an assertive Ambedkarite Dalit group:

*Aamcha Ladha Nyaya Sathi Manus Mhanun Jagnyasahti*

[Our struggle is for justice and for living like human beings]

*Phule Shahu Bhim Anna Chya Vicharachi Shaan Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan*

[The pride of Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar and Annabhau's thought is MHA]

*Manuskichi Bhik Nako-Hakk Hava Hakk Hava*

<sup>20</sup>Chapter Three presents in detail the vernacularisation of INGO rights practices in MHA's mobilisation around *gaairan*.

[We do not want our humanity (recognised) as charity but as our right]  
*Vishamte Viruddh Tufaan Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan*  
 [The storm against inequality is MHA]

Awad has also encouraged registration of other organisations and trade unions which are independent of RDC but remain affiliated informally under the larger umbrella of MHA. These organisations are implementing small projects; key amongst them is Savitribai Phule *Mahila Mandal* (Women's Organisation, SPMM).

The MHA can be distinguished from non-Dalit NGOs in Marathwada, not only in its claims for self-representation and recognition of Dalits in the NGO field, but also in its willingness to engage in conflicting processes of Dalit assertion, its networking with Buddhist NGOs and its use of Phule-Ambedkarite ideology and symbols. Dalits politicised by MHA in some villages erected boards with the MHA logo that came into being in 1995. This logo contained the earth held in two hands and the flag, half red and half blue, which symbolised caressing the world with Ambedkarite and Marxist ideas. Awad maintains that he is influenced by Ambedkarite and Left ideology and felt that the Left has failed in India because it did not come through Ambedkar but through the Brahmins. Awad also disagrees with the Left's criticism of NGOs. He insists that caste hierarchy is much more dangerous than neo-liberal globalisation and distinguishes the priorities of Left from his own:

For instance if [standing crops on] *gaairan* [cultivated by Dalits] are destroyed by cattle [of upper castes] they [left] will not protest, they will say that that the world economic order should change. If a Dalit woman is raped. This is not their priority. If a Dalit is beaten up this is not their priority but globalisation should not come—this is their priority. They cannot think at a smaller level; most of their suggestions are impractical. (Interview: 2 October 2010)

The MHA local mobilisation and the externally funded projects of RDC are intertwined in various forms. Some MHA activists are part of the paid staff of RDC projects but an activist working for RDC on child rights may not be merely concerned with their project duties but would also participate in Dalit activism through MHA. Motivated activists who are not part of paid projects are mostly from the Mang caste. The activists of MHA motivate Mangs to set-up village level branches by installing boards and forming committees and organising Annabhau Sathe *jayanti*. Such politicisation of Dalits, particularly that which has

involved claiming public spaces, has also led to violent reactions from dominant castes (see Chapter Five). Activists of MHA also act as brokers and provide Dalits access to the state, besides helping them in times of difficulty—particularly violence from dominant castes.

### ***Dalit Women's Involvement in MHA***

The MHA has much stronger contact with Dalit women compared to other non-NGO Dalit groups and a visible presence of women activists. This is related, to some extent, with the various projects implemented by RDC that require securing participation of women in development activities. The MHA has seen an increase in women's participation as RDC project activities have increased.

In the case of MHA, most projects implemented through its affiliated NGOs—RDC and SPMM—revolve largely around mobilisation of women who are organised in self-help groups (SHGs) at the village level. Through this, women are encouraged to attend various meetings and rallies organised by MHA, making Dalit women a key constituent of MHA's mobilisation. The number of women activists increased over time both as a result of pressures from funders to recruit women and interest on the part of the leadership to enrol women. The MHA thus has a far more visible and active leadership of women compared to other Dalit political formations. There are women workers who are part of paid projects and there are some exceptions who work like male Dalit activists brokering state accesses for Dalits and other deprived groups.

While the main constituents of MHA were Dalit women, women's leadership has become increasingly visible since 2005. This was simultaneous with a 'dialogue' (and not imposition as insisted by funders) that was ongoing between SWISSAID and the leaders of MHA about SWISSAID's interest to deal with the issues of gender imbalance within MHA as well as within Dalit households. A project on gender sensitising was thus conceived so as to transform both the movement processes of MHA and Dalit patriarchy at household level:

The situation of Dalit women within the whole Dalit community should be brought out. It should be recognised that even within the Dalit community the women are marginalised and exploited. If Dalits are fighting against discrimination [ ... ] what about discrimination that Dalit women face? Within the movement we have women coming on the streets and

protesting but the whole leadership lies with men. The whole patriarchal structure is sustained like this [ ... ] what is the point? (Interview, SWISSAID Country Director: 28 January 2009)

Professionals provided training on gender mainstreaming to workers, both men and women. As part of transforming the leadership imbalance, new opportunities were opened up for women; key among them was the formation of a Women's Wing in MHA. Some the women activists of MHA are as active as the men, especially in dealing with the state machinery, leading protests or giving speeches. Women who were active but at the margins came to play more important roles. Very few male workers have been influenced by the training and sensitisation processes and have embraced these trainings in their daily lives; others have mocked the idea of gender equality.

The MHA, however, has contributed to increased participation and politicisation of Dalit women. The women's self-help groups within MHA, that are generally formed for savings and credit purposes under state and (I)NGO practices, are also involved in organising Savitribai Phule, Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe *jayanti*. Female participants are urged through speeches by MHA activists to give up 'backward' practices such as *karan*,<sup>21</sup> *maria-aai* and male participants are particularly warned against the evils of alcoholism. Dalits are encouraged to invest in children's education and are encouraged to participate in certain ritual practices of Dalit movements; the critique of caste Hindu order and patriarchy and mobilising opinion in favour of religious conversions are merged into the projects of RDC. The activities of MHA are not restricted to caste and Dalit atrocities but also include issues like promoting education, child rights, grazing-land development, land rights, employment rights (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and health.

<sup>21</sup>A *karan* refers to a religious event of sacrificing animals (buffaloes or goats for gods) which friends and relatives feast on. A *potraj* is called to make this sacrifice in the case of goddess *Mari-aai*. A *karan* of *Mari-aai* can also be done by the village Patil if he offers the *halya* (male buffalo). *Karan* is generally done to ask for a *navas* (specific blessings) from gods or to return the blessings that goddess has extended. This will cost anything between ₹5,000–10,000 to the families that organise *karan*. The activists see this as hard-earned savings or loans taken on high interests and suggest in their speeches on avoiding such expenses and instead advise people to invest in their children's education.



### ***MHA in Local Politics and Electoral Competition***

The political influence of MHA in Marathwada has spread over years with village-level *shakha* being established in various places. The MHA locally has a distinct identity amongst the Dalit groups in Beed and is seen as a Mang group with Ambedkarite leanings. It is primarily distinguished from other Mang groups like ABMS and BRP in its Ambedkarite position. The use of 'Jai Bhim' as a way of greeting is part of daily political ritual in MHA's functioning, which is not the case among other Mang sociopolitical groups as they mostly associate Mahar identity with Ambedkar. Awad also converted to Buddhism in 2006 along with some of his followers at Nagpur to mark fifty years of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism.

Eknath Awad maintained active links with BSP till the year 2000. He was the Maharashtra vice president of BSP and contested parliamentary elections in 1999 polling 15,666 votes. Awad repeated the party line and termed these elections as 'a sacrifice for the movement and not fought with intent to win [ ... ] The prime goal was to purge Dalit votes from Congress' (Interview: 24 August 2008). The Congress candidate lost the seat only because of Awad contesting the elections as he managed to swing Dalit votes in favour of BSP. The BJP candidate who won the elections polled 300,307 votes and the Congress candidate who was runner up had polled 294,204.

One of the internal evaluation reports of RDC-CHR recommended that Awad should stay away from party politics. Awad elaborated, 'I realised if I become active in politics, we will lose some resources that we have got for people [through RDC]' (Interview: 2 October 2008). Awad, however, has not remained aloof from party politics and has pursued his political ambition despite being aware of the difficulties in achieving them. He led the process of forming an independent political party called BMP in the year 2000 which was an effort to consolidate Mang votes. Awad did not take any official position in this party though he remained the main force behind it. There was an overwhelming response from the Mangs in this initiative. The village level *shakhas* of MHA also became BMP *shakhas* with an additional logo and slogan, *BMP Ki Kya Pahchan Hath Pe Dharti Laal Nishaan* (The identification of BMP is globe on hands in red). This logo of BMP was painted on the reverse side of MHA boards put up in villages. The growing clout of BMP and Awad amongst the Mangs in Beed was not well-received by the local leaders of NCP who encouraged BRP (another Mang formation, part of

NCP) to mobilise the Mangs of Beed against Awad. While some workers of BMP were of the opinion that it should not enter into an alliance with any party for ten years, Awad formed an alliance with the BJP in 2004 to counter Congress and the BRP. Awad switched to support NCP in the 2009 elections and during my short visit in January 2010; he was scathing in his criticism of politicians and termed them as terrorists and not policymakers. Awad's simultaneous criticism and engagement with party politics seems opportunist and intriguing, but it represents the continuing importance of party politics in Dalit movements and the marginal status of Dalits in mainstream political parties.

I will dwell in detail on the use of caste in MHA's politics of caste in Chapter Six and its involvement in electoral politics in Chapter Seven. As of now, it suffices to say that MHA has a dual-faced dynamic structure: one is that of a vernacular Dalit movement with dominated by Mangs that operates within the local context of competing and collaborating Dalit movements; and the other is that of an NGO in the form of RDC-CHR.

### ***Awad: The Charismatic Leader***

At the RDC office, Dalits, nomadic tribes and sometimes lower OBCs come to see Awad to seek help for problems ranging from caste atrocities, police atrocities and threats from upper castes to skirmishes, contractor-sugarcane labourer disputes, family disputes or unnecessary bribe demands from government officials. Awad is respected not just amongst the Mangs but also amongst some Mahars, who appreciate his aggressive and radical practice of Ambedkarite ideology and raising of Dalit issues.

Awad holds a charismatic position particularly for his Mang supporters in Beed, as a leader of their own caste who is not sold out<sup>22</sup> and is committed to the cause of Mangs and can solve their problems. Within MHA, workers continually re-emphasise and construct his charisma. Locally, he is referred to with the respectful term *jija* (sister's husband). Awad owns a fleet of three cars (SUVs) which are a matter of pride for his Mang supporters. His aggressive speeches and calling for self-help and self-respect have motivated Mangs—both men and women. Some activists and supporters have put up Awad's pictures in their home and

<sup>22</sup>There was, however, discontent amongst some leaders when Awad aligned with the BJP. They saw it as end of BMP.

Awad's birthday (15 January) is celebrated by activists as an occasion for protests.

Awad's participation in international events like World Conference against Racism and plenaries of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) are locally turned into events for political performance, by organising a *satkar* (honouring) of Awad for representing Dalit issues globally. Awad is also called to speak on Dalit movements by several non-party movements and colleges and universities in Maharashtra. There are local publications on Awad detailing Awad's personal and political struggle and his Ambedkarite commitment. A book titled *Vadlatil Nikhara* (Hope in the Storm), published by MHA, was written about Awad by his Mahar friend B.S. Gaikwad.

The MHA, like BSP, is a key player amongst Dalit movements and politics in Marathwada. Its effectiveness has been in merging the global resources and local activism to challenge Dalit social, political and economic exclusion and in reforming civil society. It is not merely an elite advocacy NGO but is also rooted in the local complexities of Dalit politics. BSP and MHA constitute two critical organisations of Dalit politics that sustain the political and ideological struggles against the inequities of caste in different ways. It is through the study of their functioning in their relational contexts, that I analyse the intersections of caste, anti-caste ideology, politics and the political culture that (re)locates Dalits to the margins and also the Dalit struggle to reform state and mainstream culture, to gain recognition and dignity for Dalits.

## Conclusion: Dalit Politics—A Continuum of Sociopolitical Struggles

In a discussion on priesthood in Hinduism with some non-Dalits, I asked a Maratha in Kari village, if a Mang could become a temple priest? He replied that was '*impossible*' (Fieldnotes: 3 December 2009). Dalit politics of making society civil, functions in a context of socio-cultural 'impossibilities' and political and economic 'possibilities'. It is within this complex context that Dalit movements and assertion have continued to grow. The political fields of Marathwada continue to stage Dalit politics for dignity and full citizenship. Marathwada also represents a peculiar context within Maharashtra where the socio-economic changes have been slow and the vertical mobility of social groups has sustained

the domination of Marathas leaving not just Dalits but also other non-Maratha castes at the margins of local politics.

Dalits, however, continue to face new humiliations and political vulnerabilities that deny them full citizenship. The state constitutes an important site of political engagement for Dalit politics as a structure of opportunity for socio-economic and political change. The state, however, also plays a role in denial of justice and mobility to Dalits. The non-party struggles that strive to stay away from party politics and engage in political education of Dalits also construct a political culture which makes the state significant, thus, blurring the boundaries between the state and civil society. Sites of Dalit assertion for recognition and redistribution in public/civil (political, cultural and economic) spheres are also sites of violent or strategic repression of Dalits which are charted in the following two chapters. The next chapter specifically explores Dalit politics for land rights in Marathwada and their intersections with international civil society.

# 3

## Of Peasant Kings and Untouchable Citizens

### Caste Violence and Democratisation of Public Spaces

Caste and its hierarchic functions are fast changing for Dalits in rural Marathwada. In globalised times, exclusionary practices of caste however resurface in nuanced ways. The dynamism of caste has not resulted in acceptance of Dalits as equal citizens in rural ‘public’ spaces. Dalit citizenship claims in public spaces of rural Marathwada are regularly faced with retributive violence carried out mostly by dominant castes. The normalised view of Dalits as ‘untouchable’ subjects in village polity contradicts the postcolonial possibilities of Dalits as citizens. The making of Dalits as lower subjects in postcolonial politics calls for a serious reconsideration of the standards of civility and tolerance in public spaces.

This chapter explores the stir between the postcolonial ideals of citizenship and the ordinary cultural practices of caste exclusion which necessitate Dalits as ‘untouchable’ subjects. I address here the questions related to the centrality of caste in public spaces and detail the complexities of Dalit assertion and democratisation processes in the grassroots of Marathwada. Some of the key questions that I seek to explore are: Does the continued violation of Dalit citizenship point to impossibility of civility in rural publics? Why and how do Dalits make citizenship claims to public spaces in Marathwada? Why does Dalit assertion in public space

result in violent retribution from dominant castes, particularly Marathas? How do Dalit movements respond to the exclusions and violence they face in public spaces? What does Dalit assertion in public spaces mean for Dalits and non-Dalits?

I argue in this chapter that Dalit assertion in public spaces is in many ways linked to the making of society civil or civil society in India. While caste is undergoing changes due to economic factors, Dalits participate in changing caste relations into civic relations by negotiating and renegotiating their social and political status in public spaces. In renegotiating and claiming dignified existence in public spaces, Dalits invite violence from the opposing dominant castes, particularly Marathas. The daily public practices of trust,<sup>1</sup> equality, individuality and self-determination are in varied forms influenced by the Maratha patronage. In the context of Marathwada, sustaining political and cultural practice of caste exclusions seems largely a burden of Marathas as a dominant caste.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, I briefly present the meanings of the changing economy and labour practices for Dalits in Marathwada. This section describes in particular the intersections of material and cultural practices that sustain the 'untouchable' status of Dalits and the disjuncture that the increasing monetisation of rural society has introduced to the socio-economic and ritual practices in Marathwada. However, material changes for Dalits have not necessarily meant undoing the sociopolitical exclusions that they face. The second section thus explores the critical role of public spaces in sustaining or challenging the political and ritual exclusion of Dalits. It presents varied forms of Dalit assertion in public spaces that evokes reactions including violence from Marathas. The third section presents cases of violence that Dalits faced during my fieldwork and highlights the intersection of socio-religious with political, particularly the ways in which Maratha honour and status sustain the degraded social status of Dalits in public spaces. Section four presents Dalit movement efforts to securing justice through

<sup>1</sup>Seligman (2000) makes 'trust' central to the making of society civil. For him, 'Trust is a form of belief that carries within it something unconditional and irreducible to the fulfilment of systemically mandated [social] role expectations' (Seligman 2000: 45).

<sup>2</sup>Quigley (2003) and Raheja (1988) have emphasised the central position of dominant caste in a village's social structure.

state institutions. Dalit movements do not merely mobilise against Marathas but engage the state institutions, at times through the use of strategic violence against the state apparatus.

In the conclusion, I argue that challenging traditional authority of Marathas in public spaces also involves altering the private socio-ritual beliefs of the Marathas. Violence against Dalits is thus also a marker of dominant caste adjustment to a new understanding of civility and public spaces where social status may not necessarily translate into political privileges. It is these complex processes of civil society and democratisation of public spaces that help Dalits gain status of equals in rural public spaces.

## Changing Economy and 'Untouchable' Roles: Old Labour Practices as Slavery

The earlier labour practices that stigmatised Dalit bodies socially and politically are increasingly termed as slavery (following Ambedkar's maxim—'tell a slave that he is a slave and he will revolt') by Dalit activists and Dalits influenced by Dalit movements. Labour practices linked with Gavaki and Yeskarki besides causing social stigmatisation of Dalits also sustain their economic dependence. Dalit activists and labourers emphasise liberation in not being dependent on Marathas for their livelihood sources. The changing labour practices and increased monetisation of economy has led to mobility of labour in Marathwada. Migration as sugarcane-cutting workers to the sugar belts of northern Karnataka and western Maharashtra has facilitated economic mobility and independence amongst several Dalit families. It is not rare to come across Dalit families who had bought land, built houses or invested in their children's education based on their earnings as sugarcane-cutting workers. Dalits also try to make the most out of other non-farm employment opportunities in neighbouring towns.

One Dalit activist in his early thirties described to me how the practice of Gavaki constructed, humiliated and stigmatised the existence of Dalits in public spaces. He used to go door to door through the village in the evening for *bhakri* (a flattened bread made out of jowar, bajra or maize flour), as part of Gavaki till he was fifteen, 'I used to feel that we are supposed to live like this' (Field notes: 7 June 2009). It is increasingly

difficult to find families now who strictly survive on traditional practices like Gavaki. Other caste-based practices are also being challenged. The traditional *halagi*<sup>3</sup> playing, for instance, is now turned into commercial music playing groups called *banjo* parties who perform during marriages.

Sukhdeo (thirty-three) from Phule Pimpalgaon village runs one such commercial music group. He had contracts worth ₹2 lakh in 2009 of which he had saved 90,000 for himself. With each contract he makes around ₹5,000–7,500 for events like marriages, *jayanti* and *warat* (processions). He has twenty workers in his group of whom eight are *bouddha* (or Mahar converts) and the rest are Mangs. He insisted that the pollution of touch associated with *halagi* playing is no longer relevant to his profession. For instance, he described the changed treatment for them as *banjo* players in upper castes marriages, ‘We sit in their *pangat*, it is not like earlier we do not sit separately, some of us eat in turns with the guests, no one knows who we are and no one asks’ (Field notes: 1 June 2007).

*Pangat* refers to the seating arrangement (in rows) meant for dining during marriages and other socio-religious gatherings. Earlier, the *pangat* of Dalits on such occasions was not part of the main *pangat* where castes above Dalits sat. Dalits were traditionally also made to carry their own plates to such functions. Metal plates are no longer used, instead *patroli* (plates made out of dried leaves) are used for dining that do not require washing. Though this is changing, it is still the upper castes who necessarily cook meals in such marriages and a Dalit cook is unimaginable. Changes though slow are evident and the new form of playing music as an occupation for Mangs and Mahars is not just economically attractive but is also seen as socially just.

Earlier labour practices in Marathwada were non-monetary transactions—labour mostly being exchanged for grains. Besides denying Dalits a respectable social status, this practice also sustained extreme poverty and indebtedness amongst them. Dalit activists of various groups have made the most out of the Emergency period during Indira Gandhi’s regime in 1975–1977 (referred to as *aanibani* locally) by spreading the word that the laws had changed drastically and all the loans (mostly grains) that were given to Dalits by the *savarnas* were waived. They also

<sup>3</sup>*Halagi* is a type of drum that Mangs are traditionally supposed to play on occasions such as marriages and religious processions.



asked the Marathas to return cattle and other belongings of Dalits that had been taken possession of as security for loans given to them.<sup>4</sup>

Dagdu from the Mang caste who is in his late sixties recalled the lack of '*vijjat*' (respect) in the earlier treatment of Mangs and recounted to me the humiliations that were part of their daily survival.

Dagdu: When they [Marathas] used to go to pray to *aai* [meant *Mari-aai*] they used to say, *chal re Manga*.<sup>5</sup> [ ... ] We used to lead them playing the *halagi*, both while going to *aai* and coming back.

S: And they used to pay you for this.

Dagdu: No money, they used to give *bhakar*, one *bhakar* (flattened bread).

S: And did working on the land too fetch you *bhakar*?

Dagdu: No, they used to give us *jowari* (grain). We used to work [involving threshing grain] for months on the *khala*.<sup>6</sup> There were no machines then.

Samala (Dagdu's wife): We had to go behind the bullocks, round and round for months during *khala* [ ... ] till the jowar was ready [for packaging].

Dagdu: Then they used to give us five *payali* (a measure of 4–5 kg) jowar. We also had to give them a *gofan*<sup>7</sup> annually and a broom every two months. Whenever we gave them the brooms we returned with *bhakar*. We also had to give them *awat* and *dawa* [other form of ropes].

S: How many years back was this the case?

<sup>4</sup>The propaganda campaign during Emergency that reached villages included a talk of new programmes for the poor such as land reform, debt moratoria, credit for the small farmers and homes for the homeless (Schlesinger 1977). The DPs endorsed the Indian Emergency (Morkhandikar 1990). Dalit activists tried to make most out of authoritarian rule in favour of Dalits by causing panic of new laws in the villages. Sham Tangade, a veteran activist shared, 'We started working on these issues [debt moratoria, land for building Dalit houses]. This news spread and Dalits started visiting us seeking help, particularly, to deal with their debts' (Interview, Sham Tangade: 5 June 2009).

<sup>5</sup>*Chal* means 'let's go' and *re* connotes authority and rudeness. While Mang is a general description of caste, the form Mang-a, is derogatorily used by upper castes to symbolise their power over the Mang and also the inferior status of the Mang.

<sup>6</sup>*Khala* is the space on farms where the threshing of crops is done. Earlier, bullocks were used to crush the grains. Mangs, generally, were not given the best grains but the damaged ones.

<sup>7</sup>*Gofan* is a special rope used by farmers to keep sparrows away from jowar and bajra crops. Mangs as part of their stigmatised caste occupations were also required to make ropes.

Dagdu: Say around 20–25 years ago.

S: And now you get money for this. Is this any better?

Dagdu: This is good.

S: Why?

Dagdu: This is good, there is *paisa, pani, vijjat* (money, water and respect). Earlier, we did not know what *vijjat* was. We did not know where it was; how it was? [laughs]. [We] just lived, for [a loan of] two *chipta*<sup>8</sup> *jowari*. I once sat in front of the Patil's house till 11.00 p.m. They were having dinner and I sat outside their door waiting. He would ask his wife to see if I was still waiting or had left. She would come out see me and go inside again. And finally when he was done with everything he came out only to speak badly to me. He said, 'Has your father kept *thevi* (savings) with me that you are here to ask. You are sitting here till midnight for two *chipta jowari*.' Even then I kept quiet. When he went inside and gave two *chipta jowari*, I returned home gave it to my wife which she then crushed on the stone and cooked. Finally, we fed our children. This was our state.

S: How did it change and why?

Dagdu: Much changed since *aani bani*.

S: What happened?

Dagdu: People were saying laws have changed, do not treat them like that [ ... ] Don't ask back loans, its *aani bani*, they [Dalit activists] used to go to the Patil and tell him that the government had waived all the loans. (Interview: 8 March 2009)

The older generations of Dalits emphasised that the rising importance of money for labour had made living better for the present generations. They also associated earlier occupations with the discriminatory treatment that they faced daily. *Bhakri* as a medium of exchange for labour is now viewed as causing both the social and economic exploitation of Dalits.

Swarga in her sixties from Phule Pimpalgaon cursed the earlier economy that revolved around *bhakri* and shared, '*Paisa nazari navata* (there was no money to see) [ ... ] *Lok fakt bhakri saathi jagayche* (people used to live just for *bhakri*)'. Her daughter who is married in the neighbouring village added, 'Now people take *uchal* (advance) from *karkhana* (sugarcane industries) and there is no need for you to go to their (Maratha) *bandh*' (Field notes: 2 June 2009). The literal translation of *bandh* would

<sup>8</sup>*Chipta* refers to a small cylindrical-shaped tin jar used for measuring. Two *chiptas* make one *sher*, which is around one kg. Dalits were also served water and tea in the *chipta* earlier.

be bunds in farms but it is used here to connote the lands and territories of Marathas. Entering these territories on a regular basis as dependents can make Dalits docile and susceptible to and quiescent about, humiliation, exclusion and violence. Dalits thus prefer to migrate as sugarcane labourers, lured by both money and dignity. Dalits who work as sugarcane-cutting workers take advance (*uchal*) from the *mukadams* (contractors) before leaving for sugarcane cutting. This was around ₹30,000 per couple for six months in 2008–2009 (this was raised to ₹38,000 in 2009–2010). A sugarcane-cutting worker turned *mukadam* informed me that the rate for cutting one tonne of sugarcane this year was ₹89.49. Each *koyta*<sup>9</sup> (couple) could cut up to three tonnes and earn around ₹200 per day, which did not include any extra money they could make from the owner of the sugarcane fields.

Swarga's son Babu had recently got his daughter married to a groom from Dhalegaon (Georai Taluka) who works in a company in Nashik. Babu had spent ₹94,000 for this marriage and his daughter had also received education till tenth grade. Babu works as a centering worker in the nearby Majalgaon Town, whenever he gets work he earns up to ₹200 a day. Babu's house is a two room semi-*pucca* construction with a fenced compound.

I asked Babu if his house was built under *Gharkul*, a state government housing scheme, meant for SCs and other poor in Maharashtra. His current house that stood in the place of a small hut he had earlier, built with the money he had earned through sugarcane cutting. He and his wife Ramlila worked as sugarcane cutters for six years before building this house. Ramlila added, 'My elder son was just twenty-day-old when I went for sugarcane cutting. We used to put him in a saree [a cradle made by hanging a saree cloth] and worked the whole day' (Field notes: 2 June 2009). Despite hardships, Dalits prefer to migrate to faraway places as sugarcane workers than to work in villages on the lands of the dominant castes.

The economic changes though substantial are precarious. There is also no direct relationship between economic mobility of Dalits and dignity claims of Dalits in public spaces. Not all Dalits who had experienced such partial<sup>10</sup> economic independence (i.e., those who were not dependent

<sup>9</sup>*Koyta* literally means the blade that is used to cut sugarcane. However, one *koyta* in the sugarcane-cutting business terminology refers to two workers (mostly husband and wife) who together make one *koyta*.

<sup>10</sup>It is important not to exaggerate Dalit mobility or assertion. See Jeffery et al.'s (2001) critique of Pai (2000).

on dominant castes) were turning their opposition to hierarchic practices of caste into practice. Dalits, despite being aware of the discrimination they face, may be neither united nor willing to question their exclusion. A Dalit informant from a village in Beed Taluka who was a sugarcane migrant worker, discontent with the Marathas' dominance in his village said, 'Our village is very *baara bodyacha*,<sup>11</sup> they do not let us touch their water pots and pour water from above [a distance] for us to drink. They do not even pay our wages properly; they pay it once in fifteen days rather than weekly.' He also shared his disappointment that the 35–40 acre grazing land was still not 'encroached' in his village by landless Dalits.

Despite achieving some economic mobility, Dalits may still be under the sociopolitical and economic dominance of upper castes. Dalits continue to face caste exclusion in various forms and these vary according to the struggle that Dalits have initiated in their local context against such discrimination. Assertive actions of Dalits that challenge the authority of Marathas evoke violent reactions making Dalit assertion a risky proposition for Dalits dependent on dominant castes.

Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) distinguish traditional forms of violence against Dalits in the past from the present forms, which they suggest are related to modern forms of Dalit resistance. Dalit assertion, resistance and the violence they face in the villages of Marathwada, I argue are related to democratisation of public spaces. In public spaces such as the village road, temple, panchayat building or village squares, Dalits are not allowed an equal space or status. Violence against Dalits has cultural and politico-economic reasons and collective violence against Dalits can be viewed as a reaction against Dalit claims to citizenship rights in public spaces. Violence, however, has a productive role and Dalits and Dalit movements in responding to the violence actively engage with the state institutions and procedures. Dalit politics thus challenges traditional forms of authority that dominate public life and spaces in villages and contributes in making public spaces conducive for a *civil* society.

In the following section, I will elaborate on the nature of changing Dalit assertion and their claims of dignified entry into public spaces. It is mostly the Marathas who object to the assertive actions of Dalits and resort to violence as their traditional authority in the village is questioned.

<sup>11</sup>A verbal abuse, *baara boda* literally translates into twelve vaginas, a slang generally used to comment on a woman's sexual promiscuity or loose character.

## Dalits, Public Spaces and Political Violence

The intersection of private and public spaces in the making of a public sphere and civil society may not be specific to any culture or society. The making of bourgeois publics in the European context marked such an intersection where literary writings influenced private realms and the rise of humanness in the family, which in turn created public spaces and a public sphere that was critical of public authority of the state and where rational arguments came to be considered sole arbiters (Habermas 1991). Public spaces increasingly came to be associated with the bracketing of social status and ‘a political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which [was] in opposition to absolute sovereignty [ ... ] public opinion came to assert itself as the only legitimate source of law’ (Habermas 1991: 54). While forging an Indian comparison with the bourgeois publicness of the West has shortcomings, the idea of public space as one meant for all irrespective of status and as central in forming public opinion is a critical one to engage with in the case of Dalits.

If equality for all marks the ideal of public spaces, ‘then few areas in India constitute public space in any meaningful sense since space has usually been hierarchically patterned’ (Gorringe 2005: 178). Rao (2009) has detailed the intersections of Hindu right to ‘private’ property (temple) and the customary practices of caste sociality that segregated untouchables under colonial rule. Dalit politics in the colonial rule placed, ‘the temple within governmental control and imputed to it a “publicness” dissolving the distinction between civil and religious space’ (Rao 2009: 90).

The postcolonial procedural practice instilled in the liberal Indian Constitution recognises public spaces as ‘public’—one that citizens can access equally irrespective of caste. However, the actual practice for Dalits, besides being anti-procedural is very complex and riddled with violence. The influence of socio-religious beliefs that construct the untouchable status of Dalits in public spaces and the liberal idea of citizenship both configure the complex terrain for Dalit citizenship. Dalit politics and empowerment in public spaces thus needs to be studied not through merely focussing on consensus that emerges in the public sphere but also through conflicts and violence in public spaces at the grassroots. Violence, as Spencer (2007: 133) argues, is ‘not simply the reproduction of local structures of antagonism, but also an opportunity for a remaking of local social order’.

The location of Dalits in the rural public (sociopolitical and cultural) spaces comes under pressure for change through Dalit assertion and responsive violence. Assertion against their marginal location in public spaces is mostly facilitated through Dalit exposure to Dalit movements and/or activists. Most conflicts between Dalits and dominant castes are still associated with the 'mode of Dalit entry' into the village (which is the non-Dalit part). For the Marathas and other castes above Dalits, Maharuda and Manguda (the localities where Dalits reside) are necessarily outside the bonds of village boundaries and publics, making the social and political exclusion of Dalits a spatial necessity. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, Dalit *cheris* (colonies) are jungle-like spaces for the village (Gorringe 2005). Like the dominant castes, Dalits too in their casual conversations do not consider their part of the village as 'the village'. Most references to discrimination are against the villagers (*gaavat-le* or *gaav-kari*) who mistreat them. The traditional understanding of village as one belonging to non-Dalits, particularly Marathas, is still a spatial practice in rural Marathwada. The village as a public space is, thus, truly public only when it is void of Dalits.

Dalits, however, increasingly enter the village in politically assertive forms with symbols of protest. Violence against assertive public displays and performance of Ambedkar symbols increased in Marathwada with the *Namantar* struggle. The consolidation of commemorative political symbology in Dalit politics was seen as Dalit militancy by Marathas resulting in political violence to counter Dalit militancy. Retributive violence against Dalits has thus come to be a mode of public communication. Such violence involves reinvention of ritual-archaic forms of humiliation against Dalits, mostly performed in public though violating Dalit bodies (Rao 2009).

*Jayanti* of *mahapurushs* (literally translated as great men; the term 'great men' is often used synonymously for Dr Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe)<sup>12</sup> are important occasions for Dalit assertion and protesting against their excluded and untouchable status in the village. *Jayanti* celebrations in the villages pass with pomp through the main village streets where Dalits were not allowed to walk with their footwear few years back or were excluded in some other form. Entry of those perceived as untouchables and untouchable symbols of protest in the village accompanied with

<sup>12</sup>Dalit social movements merge the symbols of Ambedkar and Annabhau for sociopolitical mobilisation. I will deal with this in the next chapter on Mang mobilisation.

loud political performances goes against the traditional understanding of Dalits as docile bodies in upper caste imagery. Underneath, I describe an Annabhau Sathe *jayanti* in Rajewadi that illustrates the masculine performance of Dalit youth in a village that did not allow Dalits in the Hanuman (monkey-god) temple a few years ago.

There was loud music and sounds of whistling, Annabhau Sathe *jayanti* was in procession (*mirvanuk*). A large framed photograph of Annabhau Sathe was kept on the bonnet of the jeep. Young men around the jeep were shouting slogans 'Annabhau Sathe Zindabad' (victory to Annabhau), 'Bharatratna Dr Ambedkarancha Vijay Asso' (victory to Bharat Ratna Dr. Ambedkar). Youth continued dancing to loud music throwing *gulal* [red powder]. Some heads were totally smeared in this powder. (Field notes: 20 August 2008)

Annabhau Sathe *jayanti* is not celebrated in all the villages but is an event that is spreading amongst the Mangs. It is through voluntary contributions that Mangs in Rajewadi village organise Annabhau Sathe *jayanti*. This *jayanti* has become a festival for Mangs and most of those who migrate to places such as Pune for work, return for a short period to attend it. Rajewadi though a remote village where no state bus plies, has a history of Dalit mobilisation.

The MHA had mobilised the Mangs here in 1994 on the issue of temple entry and against bonded labour. The celebration of Ambedkar *jayanti* too was riddled with conflict and the Mahars, Mangs and Chambars had together organised this celebration. In a recorded informal conversation, the Mangs discussed how the Marathas viewed the changes in the socio-economic and political functioning of Dalits at the village level.

Shivaji: See things are changing, our women used to work at their place; we used to be totally dependent on them. Now things are changing, our boys dress better than them. In the panchayat, some posts get reserved for Dalits, which they do not like. They feel that the village belongs to them. Vishnu: No one is doing caste-based work now. Earlier, we used to wear their old clothes.

Bandu: They do not like this. They cannot see this.

Shivaji: Let the Marathas do it now. Now the Mahars and Mangs are doing well. Some have land and some have jobs. Let them come and drop *sarpan* (firewood).<sup>13</sup> Why are they not doing it? Because they cannot

<sup>13</sup> Earlier, Dalits as part of caste duties used to cut and deliver *sarpan* at the doors of Patil families.

do this *halkat* (lowly) work. Now our people are educated, we won't do it. So, they feel that we are *maajalet* (one with excess body fat/ turning deviant) and that is why conflicts have increased.

Bandu: Because we do not do caste-based work, they think we are *majalet*. Shivaji: Earlier, they used to say, 'Mang, Mahar please stay in your limits'. Now if they comment on caste, our people cannot take it. They cannot tolerate it and become angry if you say anything on caste. (Group Interview: 9 March 2009)

Dalits in Rajewadi have not restricted their violation of caste boundaries to mere celebration of *jayantis*. They have further challenged the physical 'village' and '*Dalitwada*' distinction as well. A Mahar in this village bought a house from a Mali in the midst of Maratha households despite Maratha resistance. Shivaji, another Mang who was a *saal-gadi* and turned to sugarcane cutting has now bought a piece of land in the 'village' from a Maratha for ₹11,000 and was planning to start a *chakki* (flour mill) here. He had already installed the grinding machine but the construction of a shed was stalled midway as the Marathas were opposing this. Shivaji had halted the construction of the flour mill to avoid the possibility of violence. While the Mangs here may have claimed some dignified space in the village the struggle for more is ongoing. Dalits are, thus, crossing the set limits of caste boundaries in various ways. Marathas view such claiming of public spaces in the village or the violation of caste boundaries by Dalits as deviance, termed locally as *maqj* and this can prompt violent retribution. Dalit claims on the other hand also stretch the boundaries of dominant caste perception about Dalit existence in public spaces.

## Violating Caste Boundaries and the Public-Private Dimensions of Caste Atrocities against Dalits

In this section, I will detail some cases of violence against Dalits and Dalit mobilisation that occurred during my fieldwork. The first was in Pindi village on 19 January 2009, followed by more cases in the villages of Khadki Ghat and Ladewadgaon on 26 January. In Pindi village, the Marathas beat up two Dalit girls aged eighteen and nineteen when they were returning from their field. On a later date, one of the victims recounted to me what had happened that day. She recounted to me that



the Maratha youth used to regularly eve tease, which the sisters had chosen to ignore in the past.

On that day when we were returning from the fields, one of them commented, '*Salaam tumchya sabhyatela, Mahar layach sabhya jhale* (salutations to your decency, Mahars have become too decent)' and pushed me from behind and I fell down. I shouted back pointing my finger at him, 'Can't you see?' He reacted by slapping me and said, 'You Mahar, how can you point a finger at me like that?' His mother and other boys also joined him in beating me. (Informal discussion: 19 May 2009)

Since they owned some land and their elder brother worked in Pune, these two girls were pursuing first year B.A. and were not labouring on Maratha lands, but the act of pointing a finger in anger and questioning the Maratha went against the respect that Dalits traditionally show for Patils. Such respect would include making way for Marathas on the *paai-vat* (beaten track) and not crossing them. These girls were beaten and dragged through the village streets till their homes. The girl who had pointed her finger was the most badly beaten. Besides the Maratha men, two Maratha women were also involved in thrashing the girls. Sanjeevani, a Mahar woman, a key witness in this case, described to me her fear and helplessness:

No one came [to rescue the girls]. Everyone was watching from a distance. I went close and said, 'Let it be. Leave her.' But I too was afraid... They were hurling huge stones at her and they would have thrown some at me too... They first hit her with sticks and once she fell down they were throwing stones at her. I felt a lot but could not do anything, I and my elder daughter came home and cried holding each other. (Interview: 19 May 2009)

The use and performance of violence against Dalit girls in the public, for talking back against the Marathas, reveals the power that Marathas wield in this village over public spaces. The subordination and the sexual control of women and low-caste men are also keys to sustaining caste hierarchies (Chakravarty 2003: 67–77). The specific experiences of violence that Dalit women face are also related to the politicisation of Dalits and Dalit politics of resistance. Rao (2009: 240) argues that 'sexual violence *is* indeed caste violence' and that upper-caste violence 'resurrects archaic forms of sexual violence and punishment in direct proportion to the politicisation of Dalits'.

The violence against these two girls was not the first incident that had happened against Dalit women in Pindi; another Dalit woman (Sanjeevani's mother-in-law) was murdered in a land-caste dispute in 1991. This case is still doing the rounds of courts and is currently in the Supreme Court. The threat of violence from Marathas to Dalits, particularly Mahars in Pindi, dates back to the *Namantar* movement. Some amongst the Mahars from Pindi were campaigning in favour of *Namantar* and the Marathas responded by threatening to burn down the *Dalitwada* forcing some Dalits to move out of Pindi for good.

There were several other instances of violence against the Dalits in Pindi, which were not reported to the police. It was mostly the Mahars who were targeted but there were cases of violence against other SCs as well, the most recent one against a Chambar woman in public view in early January 2009. The Chambar woman shared this with the women activists of MHA but had not dared to file a legal complaint.

In Pindi, there were also various cases of violence against young Dalit men. Two youths were beaten up by the Marathas in the past on the suspicion of them having affairs with Maratha girls. In 1998, one of them was tied to an electric pole and thrashed whilst his brother was hung upside down in a well and dunked. In 2001, another was unrobed, his head was shaven, and he was taken through the village to the police station where a case was registered against him under Section 395 (dacoity). This youth was kept in the police station for three days where he had begged to register a case against those who had beaten and humiliated him. However, a simple Non-cognisable (NC) offence was registered against the Marathas.

Dalits, particularly men, cross the social and traditional boundaries of caste by indulging in what are considered as 'vulgar' acts of love or sex with Maratha women. The pure personal spaces of the Marathas or for that matter any other twice-born caste are attached to the purity of 'their' women and Dalit men loving or assaulting upper-caste women is the gravest possible social violation.<sup>14</sup> One of the youths who was beaten up earlier by the Marathas elaborated, 'Let me tell you. If this case [of violence against Dalit girls] would have been *ulta* (vice-versa), then the Marathas would not have even kept our bones for *panchnama* (post-mortem)' (Interview: 23 January 2009).

<sup>14</sup>During fieldwork, another incident of violence was against a twenty-year-old Mang youth in a village in Aurangabad District. He was tied to an electric pole in front of Shivaji's statue and thrashed till he died. The Mang youth was said to be having a love affair with a Maratha girl (Repoter 2009).

The gendered basis of Maratha male authority in the village adds to the blurred boundary between private and public at the village level as their ‘private’ honour of the dominant castes is intertwined with the supreme status they hold in sociocultural and political public spaces. Thus, the main village where the temple, panchayat building or water sources are located, though public, are also rendered private in one way due to the ritual and political superiority that dominant castes hold in the village. Assertive Dalit entry into these spaces is seen as a deviant encroachment upon both the status and honour of the Marathas. Nagaraj (1993) attributes contemporary violence against Dalits to the breaking down of the village justice system that gave the dominant castes an upper hand over the lives of Dalits. It was this control over the Dalits that made the ‘village’ and the ‘Maratha household’ supreme in status with the Maratha male as the head. Marathas thus club their honour and kingly (Rajeshahi) claims making their sovereign claim over the village absolute. Dalit intrusion into public spaces in assertive forms put Maratha honour under stress in full public view. Nagaraj (1993: 34), thus, argues that ‘the major problem with Indian rural society is that it cannot handle deviation now without resorting to violence and whatever little restraints it has, collapses when it comes to the question of handling untouchables’.

### Maratha Rajeshahi against Dalit ‘Invasion’ of Public Spaces

These Mundes [...] Vanjaris they are *tucch* (lowly). Some ten to fifteen years back we didn’t even touch them or allow them to get close, now they are everywhere [...] Did you see how they were recently beaten up by Marathas in Wadawani [...] All the bikes with Bhagwan Baba [religious symbol of Vanjaris] on them were broken. (Field notes: 23 August 2008)

A Maratha<sup>15</sup> in his mid-thirties, shared this in a casual conversation when a Munde (implies Vanjari) was called upon the stage during Annabhau Sathe *jayanti* in Chinchwati Village. The Mundes are lower than the Marathas in caste status and the Maratha was sharing Maratha superiority in response to the sight of a Munde on the stage—a public space. The

<sup>15</sup>He was not aware of my caste and purpose and I had joined him in mocking the speakers at the *jayanti*.

increased visibility of Vanjaris and the violation of caste distance from the Maratha's perspective had to be tamed with violence against Vanjaris and their bikes that carried the symbol of Bhagwan Baba. The increasing presence of Vanjaris in public spaces, however, may not be as objectionable as Dalits' presence in public spaces for Marathas and the idea of caste hierarchy is most strictly practiced when it comes to Dalits.

There has been an increase in political violence against Dalits in Marathwada, between the years 1998 to 2004, and Aurangabad division (Marathwada) recorded the highest number of atrocities against Dalits (Waghmare undated). The participation of Marathas against Dalits in such violence is unusually high. This data unravels the conflict between semi-feudal caste practices of Marathwada and the politics and assertive commemorative performances of Dalits. The RDC collected data for 3,529 cases registered under the SC/ST (PoA) Act between the years 1990 to 2009 in Marathwada. Amongst the cases, where caste of the accused was mentioned, Marathas were involved in 54 per cent of the cases.<sup>16</sup>

One, however, has to be cautious of an approach that evaluates specific groups of 'people' who dominate and does not situate this in a broader understanding of the 'society' (Hearn 2008). Hence, the relation between Marathas and Dalits and the dominance that affects this relationship cannot be restricted just to the relationship between Marathas and Dalits. It is difficult to treat Marathas as one whole as they are neither homogeneous nor do all Marathas participate in the violence against Dalits. It is, however, the powerful Marathas who influence the perspectives and positionality of the weak amongst them. Conflicts like *Namantar*, *Khairlanji* or *Pindi* are, thus, turned into sites for performing Maratha radicalism and resurrecting ideas/practices such as the *Rajeshahi* of Shivaji (Maratha rule), which unite the Kunbis and Marathas into 'Marathas' against '*majlele*' Dalits.

The making of Maratha identity in the post-Mandal period gained a new political turn as Maratha leaders lobbied for inclusion of a new

<sup>16</sup> Muslims (12.58 per cent) were at the second place followed by Vanjaris (7.1 per cent) and the rest were various other smaller castes such as Dhangar, Teli, Mali, Koli and Brahmin. Most cases of atrocities were committed against Mahars (49.65 per cent) followed by Mangs (23.29 per cent) and Chambhars (4.93 per cent). In Beed, data was available for cases registered between the years 2000 to 2008 which had similar trends. Out of the cases where caste of the accused was mentioned, the Marathas accounted for 53.24 per cent followed by Vanjari at 21 per cent and Muslims at 11.68 per cent (caste of the accused was not available in 5.71 per cent cases).

caste called Kunbi-Maratha so as to include the Kunbis in the OBC list. Deshpande (2004a) suggests that the Marathas formed this category to serve the dual purpose of granting Marathas easy access to the backward quota if they wish whilst simultaneously protecting their status and glory as a ruling caste. Maratha elites, thus, innovatively mould the democratic processes to usurp development benefits and reconstruct Rajeshahi (kingly status). Various Maratha social organisations in Maharashtra, including Maratha Sevak Sangh—the only Maratha formation known for its anti-Brahman(ic) stance, had come together in August 2008 to make two demands—one was scrapping of the SC/ST (PoA) Act (referred to locally as atrocity *kaayda* [law]) and the other was reservation for Marathas based on ‘economic’ (not social) criteria.

Maratha assertion is mostly fuelled by Dalit dignity claims in the political fields of Marathwada where Maratha emotions are mobilised against valorisation of Ambedkar at the cost of Shivaji. It is interesting to note that Shivaji *jayanti*, for instance, was not a norm in the villages and was not celebrated or performed in public earlier. One of the Dalits from Phulepimpalgaon said jokingly, ‘Earlier there was no Shivaji *jayanti* in this village, they (Marathas) have started it recently’ and added, ‘they are learning from us, they are now asking for reservations too, we made them *hushyar* (wise)’ (Informal discussion: 1 June 2009). Maratha mobilisation differs, however, in that it is not against hierarchies of caste but about consolidation of Maratha caste and its Hindu leanings. For instance, the symbol of Raje (king) that is found on most of the Maratha owned vehicles (motorbikes, jeeps, tractors) has religious connotations. There is a particular way of writing Raje on the vehicles. The colour has to be necessarily saffron, a two-edged flag pops out of the syllable *je* and a sword out of *ra*. The popular war cry that Marathas give when they assemble to attack Dalits is *Jai Shivaji Jai Bhawani*.<sup>17</sup> Any criticism of Hinduism (which is common in Dalit movements) is radically opposed either through direct violence or through their thick political networks.

Amol Galdhar, a leader of the NCP’s Youth Wing was at the District Collector’s (DC) office, dressed in white kurta pyjama, flashing thick gold chain, pendant and rings and a mark of kumkuk (vermilion) on his forehead. He was there to give a letter of protest against the planned meeting of *Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samiti* (a Leftist organisation that organises awareness

<sup>17</sup>*Jai Bhavani* (victory to goddess Bhavani) *Jai Shivaji* (victory to Shivaji) is a slogan generally used by militant Maratha social and political formations including SS. It is actively used in public gatherings and while attacking Dalits and Muslims in Marathwada.

campaigns against blind faith practices) in Beed. He was of the opinion that faith (*shraddha*) is a personal matter and no one should interfere.

Amol walked inside the office with the collector whereas Dalit activists who were there to submit a petition related to *gaairan*, waited outside till the peon called them inside after five minutes. Inside the office, Amol had pulled up a chair, was sitting close to the officer and was resting his elbows on the officer's table, whereas Dalit activists sat in the chairs kept in front of the officer at a distance of at least five feet from the table. (Field notes: 21 September 2008)

Only one Maratha politician visited Pindi village under the pressure of Dalit mobilisation. Leaders of Maratha non-party political formations reacted to Dalit mobilisation on the other hand by mobilising opinion and people against Dalits and the protective legislations they are entitled to.

*Akhil Bhartiya Chava Maratha Yuva Sanghatan* (All India Lion Cubs Maratha Youth Organisation) is a militant Maratha youth organisation which is referred to as Chava (Lion Cubs) locally. Chava mobilises actively whenever there is a case of caste atrocity and Dalit mobilisation. They also circulate literature and musical CDs that highlight how Dalits are 'misusing' the law and marginalising the 'brave race of Marathas'. The boards put up by Chava in villages and towns have pictures of Sambaji (Shivaji's son also referred to as Chava) forcing open the jaws of a lion with his bare hands. A text that is invariably written above this picture states 'such is the caste of Marathas who open the jaws of a lion with bare hands to count its teeth'.

In a protest march in Beed on 30 January 2009, Chava demanded a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) enquiry into the Pindi and other cases of caste violence as they felt that the cases were just minor quarrels that were being given a 'caste' colour by Dalits. On 26 February 2009, Shalinitai Patil<sup>18</sup> from western Maharashtra, founder of another militant Maratha social formation called *Kranti Sena* (Revolution Army) and Jawale Patil (Chava President) held a press conference and warned the police and the government against favouring Dalits in the Pindi case.

<sup>18</sup>Shalini-tai (*tai* means elder sister and is added to connote respect) is a Maratha leader from western Maharashtra and wife of ex-chief minister of Maharashtra Vasant Dada Patil. She is known in Maharashtra for her anti-Dalit, anti-Ambedkar and pro-Shivaji stance. She was MLA of NCP earlier but was removed from NCP because of her anti-reservation and anti-Ambedkar speeches. Both Chava and Kranti Sena innovatively combine religion (Hindu), region (Maharashtra) and caste (Maratha) in their political performances.

They reiterated that the government should not take steps that pamper Dalits who file wrong cases for money and also reminded that it is not only Dalits who vote in the elections.

One of the important disagreements that Maratha organisations had with the Dalit activists was over the nature of crime in Pindi. They insisted that there was no *dhind*<sup>19</sup> (caste-based humiliation) involved in the violence against the girls. Whereas Dalit activists maintained that beating the girls through the village streets was intended to humiliate the girls in public.

The Maratha sociopolitical organisations despite their political might were worried that the Dalit protest might lead to jailing of the accused Marathas. When it comes to accessing the state, however, the example of Amol Galdhar (given before) illustrates how Maratha leaders are privileged compared to Dalit activists. The differential access for Dalits to the state and its mechanisms of justice affects the possibilities of securing justice. It is not surprising that out of the 2,980 cases of caste violence registered in Marathwada between 1995 to 2005, only 57 resulted in conviction (Waghmare undated).<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the status and dominance of Marathas expands over the political sphere of Pindi. The local panchayat in Pindi is one dominated by Marathas who also constitute a numerical majority here. Marathas have around 250 households; the Dalits have around 100 households and the OBCs (Parit [washerman], Malis [gardener], Sutar [carpenter] and Kumbhar [potter]) around 50. Two Maratha Patils who are local leaders of BJP and NCP 'settle' most cases of violence or other disputes in the village through their traditional<sup>21</sup> (Patil) and political (panchayat) authority.

<sup>19</sup>*Dhind/dhindi* refers to processions carried out in public that pass through village streets. These are generally religious ones but *dhind* can also be carried out locally to humiliate or punish social wrongs of villagers, particularly, Dalits. This involves varied acts of humiliating like blackening of face, making Dalits eat human faeces, shaving heads and taking them around on a donkey. Section 3(1)3 of SC/ST (PoA) Act makes such humiliation in public of Dalits punishable.

<sup>20</sup>Ramaiah (2011), points out that the rate of conviction is higher in UP, it was 49.2 (2001), 49.4 (2005), 52.6 (2009), whereas in Maharashtra, the percentage of conviction was as low as 1.8 (2001), 5.9 (2005) and 6.5 (2009).

<sup>21</sup>Incidentally, a cow belonging in Pindi died due to snake bite. Maratha leaders in the village tried to give a religious angle to this by alleging that Mahars had poisoned the cow out of vengeance and demanded a case be registered against them for hurting religious sentiments of Marathas.

The Government of Maharashtra has a special campaign called the Mahatma Gandhi *Tantamukt Gaav Mohim* (Conflict Free Village Campaign) that encourages the ‘settling’ of conflicts at the village level and assures extra development grants or prizes to villages, which are ‘conflict free’. The objective of this campaign is to ensure that conflicts do not arise at all in the villages and village level committees across castes are formed for this purpose (GoM undated). The attempt from above is thus towards a consensus process of solving conflicts through deliberations. Such deliberation or ‘settling’ of caste conflicts at the village level invariably means that the perpetrators of violence against Dalits go free. Since the case was not settled at the village level in Pindi, both the powerful Marathas in Pindi despite having contrasting political affiliations lobbied in various ways with the police and the administration to save the Marathas involved in violence against the Dalit girls.

The dominance of Marathas in Pindi village had scared Dalits supporting the affected Dalit girls’ families. A Mahar youth had moved out of Pindi as he had a role in getting the police case registered. Dalits from Pindi were apprehensive about getting any *nyay* (justice) due to the economic and political might of Marathas. One of the apprehensive Dalit youths said, ‘We can never win this battle and therefore should not fight it’ (Informal discussion: 24 January 2009). The fears of the Dalits of Pindi turned out to be true, as eight of the eleven accused in the case were not arrested for long. Dalits, by contrast, had to face social boycott in the village: the electricity connection to the Dalit locality was turned off, Dalits were denied *kirana* (grocery) in the village shops and were not allowed to use the tempos/rickshaws owned by Marathas for commuting. Over the following months, police gave security to Dalits for some time; however, the hut of a Mahar was set on fire by some Marathas on 5 February 2009.

On 20 February 2009, the accused Marathas also managed to secure interim bail from the High Court bench in Aurangabad for all those who had escaped the police arrest. Their bail application was rejected at a lower court in Ambajogai earlier. They celebrated this ‘victory’ by distributing sweets and bursting crackers in the village.<sup>22</sup> By bursting

<sup>22</sup>Section 438 of Indian Code of Criminal Procedure that allows anticipatory bail is not applicable if a case is registered under the SC and the ST (PoA) Act, 1989. However, an amendment to the section that came about in Maharashtra in 1992 allows the High Court’s intervention.



crackers and distributing sweets the Marathas proved to the Mahars in Pindi that the atrocity law was not greater than their political might.

The Marathas benefit from their networks in continuing their social authority in newer institutions of democracy like panchayats.<sup>23</sup> Dalits on the other hand, may succumb to the patronising practices of Marathas. It is worth noting here that the *gaairan* land in Pindi has not been 'encroached' by Dalits assertively but 'distributed' by the two prominent Patils as if it were their own private land. Assertive 'encroachment' by Dalits would have meant a challenge to the local Maratha control of the village polity. The dominant Marathas, therefore, favoured Dalit families who were subservient by 'giving' them good quality and larger tracts of land.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Dalits who participated in *gaairan* rallies and meetings organised by RPI and MHA for regularising the encroached *gaairan* lands were questioned by the Marathas: 'Why do you go for protest despite us giving you the *gaairan*?' (Interview: 23 January 2009). Dalits from Pindi, who joined Dalit movements and rallies aimed at pressurising the state to regularise *gaairan* cultivations, were asked not to do so. Their participation in such protests and rallies that sought approval of the modern state to cultivate *gaairan* legally was also seen as a protest against the local authority of Marathas in Pindi.

The sociopolitical existence of Dalits, if assertive, becomes a challenge to the forms of kingly status that the Marathas try to resurrect through local institutions of democracy. Violence against Dalits is, thus, a function of their assertive sociopolitical and cultural behaviour. Some Dalits from Pindi particularly told me that since a Mahar youth joined the BSP and erected a board of the BSP in the village there was a lot of angst against him and other Dalits who joined him as it was seen as a move against the two Patils.

Historically, Mahars in Marathwada have been targets of the Marathas because of their conversion to Buddhism, *Namantar* and their protest against traditional occupation and roles. However, the current violence against Dalits is localised and may be evoked by varied acts of self-respect or assertion that Dalits from any caste may initiate. Dalits upset the caste relations and politics through socio-cultural and

<sup>23</sup>See Jeffrey (2000) for a detailed study of how the intermediate Jat castes perpetuate their economic and social advantage through political networks in UP.

<sup>24</sup>Two *gaairan* cultivators (one Mang and another Chambhar) who were given lands attended the press conference organised by Chava in Kaij to vouch for the non-existence of caste politics (*jatiya rajkaran*) and the peace that exists in the village.

politico-economic practices and challenge patron–client relationships that Marathas try to sustain in new forms.

## Caste Atrocity, the State and Dalit Movement Mobilisation

Dalit movements mostly rely on state mechanisms despite various challenges and a high probability of them failing to secure justice. The informal or traditional modes of justice delivery at the village level are mostly avoided, as it is the Dalit challenge to traditional authority that causes violence against them. Dalits challenge the dominance and violence against them by seeking justice outside the village through legal measures particularly the SC/ST (PoA) Act. On the other hand, Maratha sociopolitical organisations in Maharashtra, particularly Marathwada regularly mobilise protests for the scrapping of this Act. The Dalit activists, despite being aware of the shortcomings of legal measures, consider the atrocity *kaayda* as a vital protection. Their efforts to secure justice are met with challenges at the local police and other administrative offices as officials hesitate to register such cases as ‘atrocity’ under political pressure.

Sanju, a BSP worker from a neighbouring village had taken the girls of Pindi to the police station and to the local hospital. He informed me that the police inspector at the police station was not willing to register the case until Sanju used his political contacts and got one of the senior BSP leaders in Beed to speak to the additional superintendent of police who is a Chambar and supports BSP. It was this intervention that helped registering the FIR at the police station under the SC/ST (PoA) Act. The unwilling inspector had delayed registering the case till 1.00 am on 20 February whereas the time on the FIR was noted as 10.00 p.m. of the previous day. Sanju was also offered a sum of ₹50,000 to settle the matter and not register the case under SC/ST (PoA) Act.<sup>25</sup> He had also consulted some Dalit lawyers regarding the sections of the SC/ST (PoA) Act under which the case could be registered. This was influenced by the previous experiences of Dalit activists where the police had registered the case under a wrong section making the possibility of punishing the accused

<sup>25</sup>This offer was made by a worker of one of the RPI factions on behest of the Marathas (Informal conversation with the BSP worker: 20 January 2009).

impossible.<sup>26</sup> Instead of accepting the lure of money from Marathas, Sanju used his contacts with some sympathetic journalists who carried this news in Marathi local newspapers the next day, making the issue politically significant for Dalits, Marathas and the state machinery. On a later day, he informed me that Pindi was an ‘opportunity’ to deal with the Marathas that he had been waiting for so long. ‘I have filed atrocity cases in all the surrounding villages of Pindi including my own. It was only Pindi that I was not able to get and finally I got it’ (Field notes: 6 May 2009). Despite their political and economic dominance, the accused Marathas attempted to avoid legal measures in settling the dispute and lured the activist through money.

Sanju, however, came close to facing arrest and police violence later as tension flared up between Dalit youth and Chava activists around the villages neighbouring Pindi. A case under Section 395 (dacoity) was registered against him. However, he escaped arrest and fled to Mumbai as a Dalit lady police constable informed him about the Local Crime Branch searching for him and suggested that he leave Beed altogether. Dalit activists thus make use of their political networks from their marginal location. These worked marginally in their favour and use of networks was therefore coupled with protests which were not always peaceful.

Dalit movements mobilised for protests against the Pindi incident and the callous state response. Such mobilisation and protests were dispersed and occurred at different times but were homogeneous in purpose. Fac-tions of RPI held demonstrations on 20 January 2009. BSP organised a *rasta roko* (road blockade) at Massajog village on 23 January and on Republic Day (26 January). It was only BSP’s mobilisation that had non-Dalits protesting for Dalits. The group that blocked the guardian minister’s car was led by a Muslim leader and speeches were made by a Brahman and a Muslim during the *rasta roko*.

Dalit protests are not always peaceful and can turn violent against the state institutions. The doctor at Kaij Government Hospital had not hospitalised one of the gravely injured girls from Pindi on 19 January 2009. Instead he had sent the girl home with some first aid. Dalit activists saw this move as clearly influenced by political pressure.<sup>27</sup> On the next day, the girl had fallen unconscious and needed immediate medical intervention.

<sup>26</sup>Rao (2009) has detailed the use and abuse of legal categories like that of SC/ST (PoA) Act in denying justice for Dalits.

<sup>27</sup>Dalit activists were of the opinion that the personal assistant of a local NCP MLA (who is from Chambar caste and elected on the SC reserved seat) had influenced the hospital authorities on the behest of Amar Patil. This MLA was also the public health minister till December 2008.

Dalit activists visiting the village took her to the taluka public hospital and also demanded an explanation from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for their negligence the day before.

The CMO replied, 'The doctor on duty may have not felt the need to hospitalise the girl'. Workers of RPI had by now started crowding the CMO's office. One of the workers of MHA said to the CMO, 'Not hospitalising the girl also means that the crime is not grave, nor are the injuries. It also is a way of saving the culprits'. Someone from amongst those standing behind said, 'This is *jatiwad* [casteism] and he [the CMO] is trying to protect his caste fellows'. A junior doctor in the mean time was sent to examine the girl. The doctor informed the activists that the girl's blood pressure was low. He gave her some injections and asked the nurses to prepare intravenous (IV) drips. Some of the angry activists later started pelting stones, breaking the windows of the hospital building and ambulances. (Field notes: 20 January 2008)

Similarly, on 26 January, ten Dalit women activist of MHA planned to humiliate the guardian minister from Maratha caste of Beed by hurling glass bangles [a sign of femininity] at him in protest as no minister had visited Pindi or condemned the incident.<sup>28</sup> The police were cautious and had deployed a woman police inspector along with two women constables. They asked the women activists to get rid of their bags that they were carrying. Some women activists had hidden the bangles meant for attacking the minister in their blouses. Dalit women's bodies in this surprise attack rendered the police officials and even the minister momentarily vulnerable. The women activists were arrested later.

Alka refused to get into the police jeep complaining that there was no space for her to sit. A male constable walked towards her (in an authoritative way) amidst all the commotion. Alka did not succumb, 'Touch me and you will see what happens', she said to the constable who moved back.

One of constables vented his anger, 'Had they been men, we would have broken their legs'. (Field notes: 26 January 2009)

<sup>28</sup>A Dalit police inspector in Beed had provided an opportunity to women MHA workers for meeting the visiting guardian minister. This official was not aware of the intentions of MHA activists. In an informal conversation with the activists of MHA, few days earlier, they had accepted that the police are *jatiwadi* and few Dalits and OBCs who are sensitive to the Dalit cause work under a lot of pressure (Field notes: 24 January 2009). He was recently relocated to Beed police station but was transferred out of Beed immediately after the incident of attack on the minister took place.

Sen (2007) suggests that the violent activism of women may also be part of their agency in making their violent public role indispensable and challenging the mechanical inclusion of women in male dominated movements. Dalit women's violent activism in this case, though slightly different from Dalit men's activism largely revolves around public spaces. Dalit women activists in this case had made the state and state officials (especially men) temporarily vulnerable through the 'cunning' use of their 'female' bodies (considered docile sexual objects prone to violation). It is, however, difficult to find Dalit women or activists engaging in retributive violence against dominant communities or individuals.

There were more instances of violence against Dalits on Republic Day (26 January) in other villages of Beed. In Ladewadgaon of Kaij Taluka, a Mang sarpanch [chairperson of village panchayat] was stopped from hoisting the national flag and was slapped by some Marathas. In Khadaki Ghat village of Beed Taluka another Mang landless sarpanch's hut was set on fire. The dispute here was in the *Gram Sabha* (Village Council Meeting) over the allocation of two houses under the Rajiv Gandhi *Gruha Vikas Yojana* (Housing Development Scheme). It was decided that one of the houses will be allocated to a Mang which the ex-sarpanch from Maratha caste opposed. Some Marathas heckled and pushed the Mang sarpanch and abused him on caste lines in the *Gram Sabha*. The houses of the sarpanch and his mother were set on fire while the *Gram Sabha* was in progress. Both sides had filed FIRs against each other at the police station. However, it was the sarpanch who was arrested based on the FIR filed by Marathas. This was done despite the Mang sarpanch registering his FIR twenty minutes earlier than the Marathas. The Mang sarpanch was arrested as a 'precautionary' measure to prevent further violence. Several sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) were registered against him—section 143 (unlawful assembly), 147 (rioting), 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), 504 (intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace), 506 (criminal intimidation) and 34 (criminal action by several persons in furtherance of the common intention).

After the sudden rise in cases of violence against Dalits, the police and district administration's inaction and the filing of false cases under Section 395 against Dalit activists, various social and political Dalit organisations came together in Beed Town for a meeting to discuss and plan a strategy in the lobby of a government rest house. Around eighty Dalit male activists and the leader of MHA's women's wing participated in the meeting. Dalit workers participating in this meeting represented diverse, ideologically competing as well as contrasting political and

social groups like Congress (I), BSP, RPI (A), BJP, SS, Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), DPI, NCP, CPI (M) and MHA, Republican Panthers, Dr Ambedkar Advocates Association and BAMCEF. Those participating were from various castes such as Mahar, Mang, Valmiki (Bhangi) and Chambar. Besides Dalits there was one member from Dhangar (OBC) caste who was part of NCP and had come along with his Dalit friend. A senior leader who is associated with NCP and is also a leader of DPI (a marginal Mang political formation) was made the *Adhyaksha* (Chair) of this meeting.

Most participants discussed their helplessness and the involvement of both the NCP and BJP in influencing the administration and police so as to help the accused. Some advocated violence for violence, which seemed to be an idea most appreciated through applause but was not pursued. Some quoted Ambedkar and the need for Dalits to move out of villages. Dalit workers of major political formations like NCP and BJP-SS acknowledged that their position in those parties is a marginal one and they are helpless. One of the SS workers said,

The *prashasan* (administration) is not on our side and all the parties are involved in this. Be it Shiv Sena, Rashtrawadi (NCP), BJP all are *jatiwadi*. I work for Shiv Sena, they cannot do anything in this regard. They say do *nished* (condemn the incident), how will *nished* help, you are humiliated, beaten, killed, how will *nished* help? (Speech recorded: 27 January 2009)

Deliberation on strategy in such a diverse composition of participants was not easy. An argument broke between the workers of BSP and Congress as the Congress affiliate was protesting the idea of criticising political parties. This was, however, brought under control by the Chair who summed up the discussion calling for a united protest on 29 January 2009 in front of DC's office. He commented on how political parties like NCP and BJP used Dalits and also emphasised that it was not Marathas against whom Dalits had to fight.

None of these parties belong to your forefathers [laughter here]. All our people there are doing *rakhandari* (watchmen) [ ... ] Please remember that the *rajyakartas* (political rulers) here are not afraid of *samajik andolans* (social movements) [ ... ] All the political leaders know that all those (Dalits) who are leading *samajik andolans* are their own people [affiliated to parties]. They will call you in minutes and say, 'Ai Atmaram Chandane AC [referring to himself] be quiet' [loud laughter and claps here].

No caste is bad; it is a matter of *pravrutti* (inclination/leaning towards Brahmanism). We have to fight against *pravrutti* and not against any caste. If we think of attacking a caste then what about Shahu Maharaj who honoured Babasaheb? He too was Maratha, so we cannot say that all Maratha's are *jatiwadi* and nor can we say that all amongst us are Ambedkarites [laughter here]. (Speech recorded: 27 January 2009)

This meeting was followed by a protest rally on 29 January. All the Dalit sociopolitical groups united under a network that was called *Samajik Nyay Sangharsh Kruti Samiti* (Social Justice Action Committee). Around 1,000 people participated in the protest in front of the DC's office. Some leaders gave speeches and a signed memorandum was submitted to the DC's office. All the local newspapers covered this news of local Dalit groups coming together and Dalit unity. The MHA along with other Dalit NGOs in Mumbai lobbied with the National Scheduled Caste Commission (NSCC) and its members visited the concerned villages in the following days.

Dalit protests, both violent and peaceful, coupled with their use of social and political networks had led to the state machinery responding. One of the Patils who was threatening the witnesses in Pindi was expelled [forced to leave] out of Pindi by police, some police officials were suspended for their carelessness in giving protection to Dalits in Pindi and the doctor on duty at Kaij Hospital was suspended for some time. Both the Dalit girls of Pindi were treated in Ambajogai Government Medical Hospital for more than a week. Compensation was provided to some of the affected Dalit families of Pindi and Khadaki Ghat by the DC under the provisions of the SC/ST (PoA) Act.

The situation remained tense in Pindi till the end of my fieldwork in June 2009. After securing bail the Maratha families continued to pressurise the Dalit girls and their parents for an out of court settlement which the girls firmly rejected. The Ambedkar *jayanti* in Pindi was celebrated despite the Marathas threatening violence if the procession entered the village. For Sanjeevani, the woman who witnessed the girls beating, the *jayanti* in Pindi was a success not just because the procession passed through the village but because, 'Dalit youth from the neighbouring village came and danced in the *jayanti* and this made the *jayanti* good' (Field notes: 19 May 2009). The political performance of Dalit youth coupled with the commemorative celebration of Ambedkar in village public streets was also Sanjeevani's mode of protest against daily humiliations and exclusions that Dalits face.

On the other hand, the sarpanch from Ladewadgaon who was slapped for trying to hoist the Indian national flag on Republic Day did not register a police complaint despite being approached by Dalit activists and the matter was 'settled' at the village level through an informal mechanism. The propriety of caste had survived in Ladewadgaon with the untouchable subject withdrawing citizenship claim. The slap and the humiliation caused in 'public' were forgotten.

## Civilising Public Spaces

This chapter has dwelt on the centrality of public spaces in civil society and democratisation processes, Dalit claims to equal citizenship in public spaces, the resulting violence against Dalits and the complex nature of engagement with the state in Dalit politics. Public spaces in rural Marathwada are embedded in caste hierarchies and are intertwined with the status privileges that dominant Marathas enjoy. These privileges blur the personal and public boundaries in public spaces in particular. For dominant castes the personal is guided by caste superiority, purity and honour and is performed and expanded in public spaces through the dispersed institutions of the liberal state. Not surprisingly, the state engages in suppressing the conflict and on suggesting measures that could settle the conflict through communication at the village itself.

Dalit assertion in public spaces represents a critique of the caste sociality that reproduces the hierarchies of caste and the untouchable status of Dalits in insidious forms. Dalit critique, critical political performance and the resulting crisis/violence affects both Maratha authority and Dalit exclusion. Looking for civil society and its workings in rational communicative action or forging consensus makes little sense in the grassroots of Marathwada. Civil society guarantees only the existence of the public and not 'public consensus' and a strong civil society guarantees the existence of conflict (Flyvberg 1998).

Dalit activists prefer public spaces and state interventions to the traditional modes of justice mechanisms which sustain the prevalence of caste prejudices. Most retributive violence pertaining to Dalits in rural Marathwada is associated with public spaces and Dalit claims to dignity or assertion in public spaces. Assertive actions of Dalits may not



necessarily be associated with identity or ideology and may pertain to individual mobility; however, the backlash against individual/group assertion or mobility of Dalits is mostly related to caste or turned into a caste issue by dominant Marathas. Dalits and Dalit movement actors are not always victims of such dominance and they too make use of caste and the state from their marginal locations. They, thus, attempt to create dignified spaces for themselves in 'public' and also actively contribute in the processes of democratising and civilising public spaces—a process which is full of conflict, violence and contradictions.

# 4

## *Jameen Aamchya Hakkachi*<sup>1</sup>

### Politics of Land Rights and Advocacy NGOs

The previous chapter highlighted Dalit struggles for dignity and civility in public spaces. Besides protesting routinised caste violence, Dalit movements in Marathwada also have a long history of mobilisation for securing cultivable land for landless Dalits. Dalit mobilisation for securing public lands, particularly *gaairan* for cultivation continues in present times.

The present chapter engages with contemporary forms of Dalit activism aimed at land redistribution, particularly the surge of NGOs and the discourse or ‘human rights’. This chapter presents how MHA has been able to engage I/NGOs in the struggle for Dalit land rights.

Like other parts of the developing world, India has witnessed the mushrooming of private professional NGOs in the field of development since the 1980s. As opposed to the earlier emphasis on service delivery, NGO discourses and practices now increasingly articulate human rights concerns, with UN agencies and a growing number of local and INGOs committing themselves to human rights-based approaches to promoting development (Nelson and Dorsey 2003). The rise of NGOs—both local and international—seems to have consolidated what Donnelly (2003) calls the ‘international normative universality of human rights’. Intersections of local and global institutions on issues of development and human rights are thus increasingly visible in the global South.

<sup>1</sup>*Jameen Aamchya Hakkachi, Nahi Konachya Bapachi* (land is our right and belongs to no body’s father) is a slogan used by activists and participants in MHA’s mobilisation for *gaairan*.

The part played by NGOs in the development process has been a matter of some contention amongst scholars. This chapter engages in the debate on the utility and role of NGOs through the study of NGO intersections in Dalit movements. Legally recognised associations have been a resource in Dalit movements in India since colonial times, but the formation and functioning of associations with national or international funding was a phenomenon largely missing in Dalit movements until the 1980s. This chapter conceptualises NGOs as ‘new’ associations in the context of globalising grassroots and Dalit politics that interacts with transnational civil society. The rights discourse of I/NGOs is viewed here in terms of the ‘new’ technologies of rights; this allows us to chart the high moral and technical ground which this discourse claims (as compared to the ‘failed’ technologies of state) and to explore the engagement of the two technologies with Dalit movements at the grassroots.

This chapter begins by briefly summarising the two key competing perspectives on the rise and the role of NGOs in the context of globalisation. This is followed by a brief description of the land rights mobilisation of Dalits in Marathwada and the process of formation of *Jameen Adhikar Andolan* (Land Rights Movement, JAA), a network of local NGOs focussing on the issue of Dalit land rights. In the subsequent section, the vernacularisation of new technologies of rights in the local practices of MHA is discussed. Finally, I argue in the conclusion that NGOs and new rights technologies of global actors do not necessarily affect the autonomy and sovereignty of Dalit politics. MHA has vernacularised and politicised the discourse of human rights locally, which has contributed to bringing *gaairan* to the centre of local politics in Marathwada.

## **NGOs: The Making of Human Rights Politics or Neo-imperialism at Large?**

Liberal theories confirming democracy’s dependence on associations and associational life are long standing. Current development efforts increasingly concentrate on the formation of NGOs in the belief that such institutions help foster and maintain stable democracies (Paxton 2002). There is a need, however, to distinguish NGOs, as a ‘new’ species of associations, from those voluntary associations that de Tocqueville (1945) see as central in establishing democracy. This helps in delineating the voluntary character of mass-based social movements from these new private and

professional bodies called NGOs. In the study of human rights such a distinction enables us to explore the agency of people in the social construction of human rights and the counter hegemony that social movements seek to establish at the level of public common sense (Stammers 1999).

The current mushrooming of I/NGOs that advocate 'rights-based' development has been critiqued from the arenas of global political economy and micro field studies. The increased role of NGOs in development processes in the global South is also coupled with the wave of structural adjustment (policies) that swept the developing world, in which curtailing fiscal deficits and the state's social welfare role became a priority. Critics have, therefore, argued that a 'new' form of civil society through NGOs is pushed forward by multilateral aid agencies like the World Bank to promote 'anti-politics' machinery, causing the withdrawal of the state and decline in public expenditure. Harriss (2001: 118) maintains that 'the concept of "civil society" in such discourse excludes "political society"; and the sorts of "voluntary local associations" that are endorsed are not *political organisations* (such as political parties or trade unions)'. NGOs, thus, act as 'Trojan horses for global neo-liberalism' (Harvey 2007: 117), or neo-imperialism (Karat 1984) and play a key role in 'privatising' public interests (Kamat 2004). Based on her ethnographic study of NGOs, Kamat (2002: 161) critiques them as, 'corporatists that engender a corporatist identity among their members that do not facilitate a reinterpretation of the material basis for a collective identity'. Kamat explores the cooperative efforts of state and international capital in supporting NGOs *vis-à-vis* the expansion of a global capitalist economy and process of indirect colonisation. Critics see NGOs as elitist, non-representative, non-democratic private institutions that 'de-politicise' development/public welfare and warn against the NGO-isation of social movements. This criticism extends to the use of rights discourse by I/NGOs. While the proponents argue that the 'rights-based' approach aims to 're-politicise' development, opponents suggest that it is essentially dressing the same old exclusionary development in a new form (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi 2004). It is also argued that the universality presupposed in the 'rights talk' of NGOs risks the pitfall of ignoring the 'local particularities and daily process of political and economic life under pressures of commodification and neo-liberalisation' (Harvey 2007: 177–8).

The rise of NGOs globally is also viewed as an extension of neo-liberal governmentality. Foucault's conception of governmentality and associated technologies of dominance largely focus on the technologies

of the nation state. Ferguson and Gupta (2005: 123) challenge the 'very distinction insisted on by the term NGO, emphasising instead the similarities of technologies of government across domains'. The central effect of these new forms of transnational governmentality is seen as, 'not so much to make states weak (or strong), as to reconfigure states' abilities to spatialise their authority and superior generality and universality' (Ferguson and Gupta 2005: 123).

A contrasting perspective to those which (over)emphasise material dimensions and the resurrection of colonialism is provided by those who point to the existence of multiple subaltern counter publics and their global intersections. Calhoun (1999: 219) argues that 'globalisation has also led to a rise in solidarities and activities that cross borders and transnational organisations' links may also work to empower sub-national regions or other groupings'. Appadurai (2000) suggests that globalisation is not merely a phenomenon coming from above; the rise of an active transnational public sphere and networks amongst social movements creates possibilities of 'grassroots globalisation'. In the growth of transnational networks among NGOs and social movements, Appadurai (2001) also posits the possibility of 'deep democracy'—a democracy that transcends national borders—and 'governmentality from below'.

Cornwall and Nyamu-Musebi (2004) remind us of the existence of plural rights-based approaches with different starting points and different implications for development practice. Offenheiser and Holcombe (2003: 299) observe that the rights-based approach, 'transforms needs into rights, capabilities and responsibilities and puts the states' responsibilities to its citizens under a lens'. With the rise of global civil society, they also see possibilities of a global social contract in issues of environment, livelihoods and security (Offenheiser and Holcombe 2003: 300).

This brief discussion provides an overview of the debate surrounding the growth of rights-based advocacy NGOs. In the context of India, the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution clearly paved the way for the recognition of rights in education, employment and health. However, it was not until the 1990s that the rights-based discourse expanded and civil society movements began to play a vital role in the demand for expansion of social protection (Srivastava 2008). The present context of structural adjustment policies is confronted with a demand for rights-based universalisation of social protection by civil society, which Srivastava sees as a 'deepening of democracy'. The current era of neo-liberalism and globalisation has opened up certain possibilities for transnational governance and civil society, in which I/NGOs have emerged as key institutions.

## Dalit Politics, NGOs and Rights Advocacy

What does the rise of NGOs and rights-based advocacy mean for Dalit movements and politics? Jaoul's (2007) study of Dalit activism in UP presents a nuanced picture of the coexistence and interdependence of non-political (sociocultural) and political (electoral) factors in Dalit activism. Since the colonial period, Dalit movements have operated both in political and non-political modes and civic associations have been an essential part of Dalit protest.<sup>2</sup> In the postcolonial period, the growth of the BSP was based upon mobilisation of non-political associations such as Bahujan (majority) and BAMCEF.

In the last three decades, there has been an increase in Dalit NGOs working on Dalit human rights and rights-based advocacy. One of the essential characteristics that distinguishes these NGOs from earlier Dalit associations is their dependence on external financial support. I would argue that NGOs are new associations in Dalit politics that closely fit Jaoul's non-political category. The central question remains, however: does dependence on external aid and rights-based advocacy make NGOs antithetical to Dalit politics? The question has given rise to much debate. Teltumbde (2010) sees NGOs as dangerous sedatives that work against Dalit politics; Guru and Chakravarty (2005) similarly view NGOs as a means of de-politicisation that offer soft resistance to the state's neo-liberal agenda. By contrast, Ilaiah (2007) refers to the raising of caste and Dalit issues at the United Nations through international organisations as the 'globalisation of caste and untouchability'. Ramaiah (2009: 63) argues that 'Dalits during globalisation have been able to give global visibility to their issues, taking the support of a number of local, national and global level civil society organisations'.

There are a few who tread the middle path. Lerche (2008), while recognising the achievements of transnational advocacy groups in Dalit activism, has pointed out the shrinking policy space for transnational advocacy groups and their shortcomings as compared to local political activism of the BSP. Studies of Dalit activism in the transnational public sphere tend to concentrate on the functioning of networks such as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and International

<sup>2</sup>Examples of civic associations in the pre-Ambedkar era include organisations such as *Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal* and *Satyashodhak Samaj*. Ambedkar himself formed a number of organisations including the Depressed Classes Institute and the People's Education Society.

Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) at United Nations forums. However, advocacy I/NGOs do not always function in a vacuum at a meta-level, but also intersect with Dalit movements at the grassroots. Gorringe's (2005) study of Dalit movements of Tamil Nadu points to the percolation of NGO human rights discourse into Dalit movements' repertoires and rhetorics. A similar observation is made by Ratnam (2008) in the context of Andhra Pradesh, noting Dalit activists' usage of an international human rights discourse to mobilise global opinion against hierarchies of caste.

The following section attempts to further explore the intersections of transnational public spheres (that increasingly advocate coalescing of rights and development) with vernacular micro-political practices of Dalit movements. The context of Maharashtra makes an interesting case due to the history of assertive and autonomous Dalit movements and the sustained social and political dominance of Marathas. The strength of Maratha political power in Maharashtra means that Dalit movements are under constant pressure to assimilate and must continually manoeuvre to protect Dalit political sovereignty. The coming of NGOs has led to the construction of a new context of politics which I explore through the MHA and its vernacularisation of NGO repertoires in Marathwada. I build on Mercer's (2002) plea for studying the complex role of NGOs in development through a more contextualised and less value-laden approach, to explore the specific intersections of NGOs and rights advocacy in Dalit politics in Marathwada.

## Global and Local Forms of MHA: RDC-CHR and MHA

As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, the RDC was registered by Eknath Awad in 1985 under the Societies Registration Act and the Public Trust Act. The formation of RDC can be seen as part of the 'non-political' NGO boom that India has witnessed since the 1980s. Significantly, the founding by-laws of RDC that lay down its official objectives do not mention working on the issue of caste or Dalits. The broad objectives include health, education, livelihood and youth development. The RDC was, however, the associational 'cover' for Eknath Awad's Dalit activism.

The discourse of human rights which became consolidated in the practices of INGOs from the mid-1980s included a new vocabulary of Dalit

human rights (Bob 2007). In turn, the discourse of Dalit rights became part of RDC's procedural practices from the 1990s. This was a result of INGO recognition of Dalit issues and increasing (financial) support to work on them. The shift from 'welfare projects' to 'rights' led RDC and some INGOs to form the Campaign for Human Rights (CHR). In at least one sense, CHR fits the description of an I/NGO-financed movement, as some of the activists working for CHR were provided with monthly stipends by INGOs, routed through RDC.

While in the I/NGO discourses and reports (in English) this movement is called CHR, for Dalits locally it is known as MHA (in Marathi language). The RDC-CHR workers came to be known locally as MHA *karyakartas* (worker/activists) for Dalits. They focussed particularly on Mangs who were seen as the most excluded among Dalits and within Dalit movements. The activists motivated Mangs to set-up village-level branches of MHA by installing boards and forming committees to organise commemorative days or *jayanti* in honour of leaders such as Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe. MHA came to be an important Mang sociopolitical organisation in Marathwada. MHA's mobilisation against untouchability, caste violence and temple entry prohibition and for cultivating *gairan* land brought it into conflict with the dominant local castes. The latter accuse MHA of turning every case of conflict with Dalits (particularly Mangs) into a caste 'atrocities' case, registering 'false' cases against dominant castes under the SC/ST (PoA) Act.

The distinction between civil society and political society that Chatterjee (2001) employs in his study of politics at the margins seems to lack conceptual value in the case of Dalit politics. While RDC-CHR, with its international networks, may seem like an elite civil society organisation, MHA's extra-institutional activism appears political. Jaoul (2007) confirms that the political and non-political distinctions are not always absolute in Dalit movements. The state constitutes a pool of resources that Dalits, Dalit activists and movements seek to access (and exploit): Dalit movements, thus, value state and electoral politics despite their marginal locations in the local polity. Although MHA in Marathwada is a politically independent organisation, it participates in electoral politics like other caste associations and Dalit organisations. The electoral strategies and compulsions of MHA are discussed in Chapter Seven.

RDC's project activities help MHA consolidate its presence amongst Dalits. An activist working for RDC on child rights, for instance, would not confine him/herself to project duties, but would also participate in vernacular Dalit activism (such as Ambedkar *jayanti* celebrations,



protesting against caste atrocities, participating in and contesting local elections, working as brokers, etc.) through MHA. Project jobs are seen by the activists as temporary whereas vernacular Dalit activism around state and caste are of a more permanent nature. Other activists and workers of MHA who are not part of paid RDC projects mostly come from the Mang caste and MHA is also seen locally as a Mang organisation.

While state institutions usually do not fund assertive Dalit mobilisation through NGOs, international funding for RDC from INGOs has helped in merging development and rights including projects on child rights, gender equity, land rights, livelihoods and Dalit rights. Eknath Awad has also promoted and networked with other Dalit NGOs in Marathwada region which come together under the umbrella of RDC-CHR.

### **Locating I/NGOs and Rights Discourse in Grassroots of Marathwada**

Long before the rise of foreign funding for the NGO sector in India in the 1980s, postcolonial state finances supported non-government institutions, which consolidated the dominance of the landed gentry in rural Maharashtra. Marathwada, like the rest of Maharashtra, has a history of state support in the cooperative sector (credit and sugar) dominated by the Marathas (Dahiwalé 1995, Rosenthal 1974). The credit and sugar cooperatives are key institutions that sustain economic and political inequality between the dominant castes and the marginalised Dalits. Both these sectors receive regular grants from the state government in the form of working capital, loan waivers and subsidies. Similarly, various educational institutions that are managed privately by the dominant castes are supported by the government, strengthening their socio-cultural, political and economic capital.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the discursive practice of rights mobilisation in Dalit movements in Maharashtra is not a recent invention, but has its

<sup>3</sup>Social capital is a disputed term in development studies. While Harriss (2001) emphasises its depoliticising effects, I use Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualisation of social capital, which helps to underline the class and status consolidation of Marathas through their use of institutionalised networks (state and caste).

roots in colonial liberalism (Rao 2009). The liberal democratic state, its dispersed institutions and disciplinary technologies are important sites of competitive mobilisation and protests for Dalit movements. The post-Ambedkar phase of these movements in Maharashtra increased the emphasis on implementation of rights granted to Dalits under the Constitution. Present-day Dalit movements rationalise their mobilisation around the democratic liberal state by symbolically invoking Ambedkar's key role in drafting the Constitution and in securing rights for Dalits and other marginalised social groups. Dalit movements in the grassroots context of Marathwada at times violently engage with the exclusionary practices of the state and simultaneously invoke the liberal Constitution as the basis of their demand for rights. While this symbolic invoking of the Constitution can be seen as a procedural emphasis in Dalit movements, Dalit activists in the local context strategise within the vernacular substantive practices of democracy; these are deeply rooted in corruption and daily manipulative politics which largely work in favour of dominant castes. Dalit movements, thus, do not merely resort to institutional mechanisms.

The late 1980s saw the blossoming of NGO activity in Dalit politics in Marathwada. While NGOs aspire to raise voluntary contributions, very few actually survive on such funds. The emergence of southern NGOs is partly linked to changes in funding opportunities. In India, the state increased its spending for NGOs in the 1980s to promote their role in development activities. At the same time, funding flows from northern NGOs and INGOs increased. The two sources of funding tend to be channelled to different ends, with state funding covering more public service delivery and INGOs focusing on the promotion of public action through merging development and rights in a democratic context. Kamat (2002: 22) maintains that 'liberal funding agencies and liberal and left leaning individuals within private funding agencies are more often interested in directing funding towards political education'. Such political education, she suggests, is concerned mostly with feudal social relations rather than capitalist social relations. RDC-CHR, the NGO face of MHA, has indeed tended to focus on altering feudal relations, particularly, the practice of *veth begar*, a form of forced labour in the Marathwada region associated with caste. However, as already noted, MHA—like other non-NGO Dalit movements in Marathwada—has also engaged in various conflictual issues concerning Dalits, including mobilisation for cultivating *gaairan* land.

## Dalit Activism and the Land Question in Marathwada

The Dalit land question in Marathwada has inspired institutional and extra-institutional Dalit mobilisation since the 1950s. Dalit protests over such issues as *gaairan* land, forests, temples and burial sites in Marathwada can be traced back to Ambedkar and his contemporary, Dadasaheb Gaikwad (Kshīrasāgara 1994) and have continued ever since.

The vernacular discourse of Dalit rights, which includes extra-institutional measures such as illegal cultivation of *gaairan* land, is dominant locally and has been effective in getting institutional recognition. Under pressure from Dalit and other progressive political movements, the Maharashtra state government passed Government Resolutions (GR) in 1978 and 1991 (the latter marking the centenary of Ambedkar's birth), ordering regularisation (or legalisation) of encroachments. The GR of 1978 was revised in 1979 to specify 'caste' criteria, authorising the regularisation of encroachments by SCs, STs, Nomadic Tribes, Denotified Tribes or Neo-buddhists (Bokil 1996). The practice of encroachments, thus, became identified with caste; besides Dalits other deprived castes such as Pardhis and Bhils (both considered criminal tribes in the colonial period) also participated. Since the GR of 1991, the level of encroachment has increased in the hope of further regularisation of newly encroached lands.

According to Bokil (1996), the extent of *gaairan* all over Marathwada is 240,800 hectares belonging to 7,786 villages; following the 1991 GR, 28,875 hectares of *gaairan*—12 per cent of the total—were privatised. Guru (1997) challenges these figures of land allocation and points to the dominant caste-state nexus that hindered the possession of land by Dalits. Two government orders of 2001 and 2005 recognised (under pressure from various sociopolitical movements) that the GR for regularising encroached land in 1991 was not implemented efficiently by the Revenue Department and that ownership was denied to many rightful beneficiaries.

Various Dalit political and non-political organisations are still involved in encouraging cultivation on *gaairan* by Dalits in Marathwada.<sup>4</sup> They also try to pressurise the government into regularising these encroachments. The following extract from field notes describes a 2008

<sup>4</sup>The *gaairan* cultivators participate in multiple organisations and rallies. However, the organisations are not united in their efforts.

political rally on *gairan* organised by the RPI (A), called Dalit Hakk Parishad (Dalit Rights Convention):

The main roads of Beed city were flooded with blue flags and banners of RPI (A). Huge hoardings with pictures of Ramdas Athavale, president of RPI (A) were put up on the main streets. RPI workers had mobilized Dalits, mostly encroachers of *gaairan* from villages of Beed district, to attend the rally and around 20,000 people (mostly men) participated in the rally. The District leader of RPI in his speech made three key demands which included regularization of *gaairan* encroached by Dalits and other landless till 2005. Ramdas Athavale, in his usual humorous and poetic style demanded that lands encroached till 2010 should be regularized in advance. (Field notes: 4 October 2008)

## I/NGO Discourse of Rights and Networks: The Formation of Jameen Adhikar Andolan (JAA)

Senior activists of MHA were involved in promoting *gaairan* cultivation even before the formation of MHA, as members of other Dalit movements. They continued the process after the formation of MHA, becoming more active after the GR of 1991, but without any specific project support. Eventually, this activism attracted funding organisations to participate in the process of land-related mobilisation, through RDC; key amongst them was Intermon Oxfam.

Intermon Oxfam (IO) started planning projects in India in 1994, focusing on Dalits and tribals in the context of sustainable livelihood, education and health. Its initial support to RDC was for a project on the violation of Dalits' 'human rights'. Recognising the history of movement-based mobilisation for *gaairan* in MHA and the fairly organised Dalit movement in Marathwada, Thomas Arackaparampil (the head of IO) suggested that MHA should engage in some 'constructive' work such as land development of regularised *gaairan* cultivations instead of mere protests (Interview, Thomas Arackaparampil: 19 March 2009).

A pilot project for developing waste *gaairan* land was launched in 1999. The initial plan was to develop grazing land in fifteen villages for cultivation, including levelling, irrigation and training *gaairan* cultivators in sustainable farming practices. This led to a number of NGOs approaching IO to secure similar projects for developing sustainable farming practices on encroached lands. Most of these (non-Dalit led)

NGOs were part of another network, the Marathwada Lok Vikas Manch (MLVM) which was in competition with RDC-CHR for funding. However, IO pressed on, resolving the differences and forming a new 'network' of all NGOs with a specific focus on land rights.<sup>5</sup>

The IO, thus, managed to form a network of NGOs, and a livelihood project, called JAA. One of the objectives of the JAA project was to bring Dalit leaders together on land rights to strengthen their position (JAA 2005b: 9). However, the network excluded Dalit sociopolitical formations like RPI and comprised only 'grant seeking' NGOs. The keenness of Dalit leaders to gain *political* power was seen as a shortcoming of the Dalit movement and a case was made for new forms of leadership to face the challenges of globalisation and liberalisation (JAA 2005a: 43–44). This call for Dalits to go beyond political power was supplemented with sustainable livelihood promotion programmes for participating NGOs. JAA, also hoped to achieve a uniform land reform policy and increased government investment in natural resource development to enhance the livelihoods of the poor and marginalised (JAA 2005b: 10).

The key project components of JAA were research and documentation, mobilisation and advocacy for policy level changes, training and capital for sustainable farming practices and community-based microfinance. Professional consultancy firms were involved to assist in research, developing community-based microfinance institutions (CBMFI) and in developing sustainable farming practices on *gaairan*. These projects were split between NGOs associated with RDC-CHR or MLVM, according to the financial resources involved.

Eknath Awad of RDC was made president of JAA, while the head of MLVM became the secretary. In the light of its previous experience, RDC was to lead the mobilisation and advocacy component (without the support of any consultants). Kamat (2004: 161) criticises the new category of 'advocacy NGOs' for their lack of mass base and role in serving transnational capital. A similar critique of transnational Dalit networks is seen in Lerche (2008), who rightly doubts the effectiveness of advocacy-based shortcuts without the active involvement of the Dalit grassroots. The formation of JAA, however, was largely an effect of MHA's long-sustained activism around land, which attracted the support of IO. Furthermore, implanting advocacy as a 'new' technology is not necessarily a top-down process: MHA is rooted in the complex local practices of

<sup>5</sup>The emphasis on rights can also be viewed as part of IO's gradual shift from its service delivery missions to a rights-based approach (Intermon-Oxfam 2006).

Dalit movements and RDC and other NGOs that form part of MHA act as associations in a network with INGOs.

## Vernacularising JAA

The RDC project supported by IO under JAA is entitled 'Facilitating the process of securing land titles for occupants of grazing lands to enhance their livelihood in the Marathwada Region'. The mobilisation processes that activists engaged in around the *gaairan* issue were not specifically mentioned in the project plans. The villages involved in the project were divided into three categories: (1) where *gaairan* is cultivated and the cultivators have legal ownership; (2) where *gaairan* is cultivated but cultivators do not have legal ownership; and (3) where *gaairan* is available but Dalits have not yet cultivated it. The first and second category villages received inputs in sustainable farming practices and SHGs were formed to include *gaairan*-holding and landless Dalits. For the second category of cultivators the focus was on collecting and organising evidence that would help cultivators secure land titles. In the third category of villages Dalits were mobilised by MHA activists to cultivate or recultivate (if vacated through force) *gaairan* lands.<sup>6</sup> The project included new practices such as filing affidavits regarding cultivated land, the formation of SHGs and Livelihood Promotion Committees, capacity building and training for the landless and *gaairan* cultivators on their rights, sustainable farming and advocacy. These new practices were fused with the local mobilisation around *gaairan* by MHA, which has resulted in Dalit assertion and further politicisation of caste relations in Marathwada.

## Filing Affidavits

Some of the lands cultivated before 1990 have not yet been regularised by the government machinery. The emphasis in advocacy under JAA is on collecting documents to prove that the occupation of *gaairan* by cultivators pre-dates 1990 and should therefore be legalised. These documents include previous applications to the Tahasildar (block revenue

<sup>6</sup>The last activity was not supported by IO.

officer), police records, court records and registration of encroachments in government files, as well as affidavits from *gaairan* cultivators (both male and female), farmers on land neighbouring the *gaairan*, elderly villagers, *gram panchayats* (village councils) and shepherds, testifying that the encroachments pre-date 1990. Collecting and providing evidence is seen as an effort to help the state in delivering its promise of regularising land through the GR of 1991.

The official discourse of JAA does not recognise that Dalits and other landless have continued to cultivate *gaairan* and forest lands after 1990 and that this results in the frequent eruption of violence against Dalits. The problem of *gaairan* is conceptualised instead in democratic and legal terms. The technologies of advocacy of IO/JAA do, to a certain extent, depoliticise the extra-institutional nature of the Dalit struggle for *gaairan*, in which resorting to illegal means and violence are vernacular practices. K is one such village where Dalits have cultivated the forest land after 1990; the activists of MHA have not excluded this village from filing of evidence.

Dalit encroachers of *gaairan* from K village were at the Tahasildar office as their affidavits of encroachments [referred to as 'file' by MHA workers which make it sound formal and important] were to be submitted to the Tahasildar. When Sadashiv (MHA worker) asked the Tahasildar to cooperate with the poor encroachers, the Tahasildar in response asked the encroachers since when they were cultivating the land, to which one of them replied fifteen years [not realizing that post-1990 encroachments are illegal]. Sadashiv on the other hand, intervened showing the Tahasildar a letter from the District Collector requiring all the Tahasildars to 'verify' all the encroachments and legalize them if found to be legal [pre-1990]. After submitting the 'files', Sadashiv suggested the encroachers to pay the Talathi/Girdhawar<sup>7</sup> some money if they come for field visits to survey and record the encroachments. The encroachers gave Sadashiv fifty rupees for what they called cha-pani (tea and water). Sadashiv did not ask for this money but did not refuse to take it either. (Field notes: 29 September 2008)

The MHA's focus is on getting the encroachments (both pre-1990 and post-1990) registered in the records of the revenue department by filing detailed affidavits regarding cultivation of *gaairan* lands by Dalits: activists from other organisations and political parties do not engage in

<sup>7</sup>The Talathi is the village revenue officer and Girdhawar is the revenue inspection of a circle comprising several villages.

such practices. Some Dalit encroachers hope to secure land through a new GR that will extend the date of regularisation beyond 1990, but based on the experience of the 1991 GR and its poor implementation, MHA activists try to persuade Dalits to file affidavits so that they have some proof of their *gaairan* possession. Dalit encroachers of *gaairan* generally remain flexible in their affiliation and participate in protest rallies of different Dalit political and non-political organisations.

Dalit cultivators of *gaairan* who do not have legal documents are under constant pressure both from the state and the dominant castes to vacate the land they cultivate. Destruction of crops or letting cattle loose to rampage crops, as well as threatening or resorting to violence, constitute some of the strategies the dominant castes resort to locally. Sustaining the cultivation or starting new cultivation on land thus requires constant encouragement. In the discourses of MHA, Dalits are motivated to cultivate land not only for economic purposes but also to gain *swabhiman* (self-respect).

### ***Self-help Groups and Livelihoods Promotion Committees***

Since the 1990s, the formation of women's SHGs has come to be an important development strategy for poverty alleviation within various state departments. For JAA, too, there is an emphasis on forming women's SHGs to encourage women's leadership and economic independence. A total of 940 SHGs, involving 10,000 women, have been formed under JAA and loans of more than ₹37 million have been disbursed (Oxfam 2009).<sup>8</sup> Committees are also formed under JAA at the village level of *gaairan* cultivators, which are known as Livelihood Promotion Committees (LPCs). Both the SHGs and LPCs are engaged in mobilisation to secure legal recognition for *gaairan* land cultivations.

The women's SHGs are generally formed for savings and credit purposes under state and I/NGO auspices. They are also engaged by MHA in organising commemorative *jayanti* celebrations. The MHA has a wider reach amongst Dalit women than other Dalit organisations as a result

<sup>8</sup>The formation of SHGs and lending through SHGs is one component of the project. The other components include resources for mobilisation, research, the monthly salaries of activists and capacity building of activists and Dalit cultivators of *gaairan*.



of the vernacular practices of RDC projects. Under JAA, for instance, the district-level training manual for women members of SHGs and the taluka-level<sup>9</sup> training manual for LPCs include songs, games and discussions on the caste system and its role in degrading the status of Dalits and women. Activists jokingly warn SHG members that those who take part in cultural and religious activities associated with caste inequalities will not be given loans through SHGs (Field notes: 14 April 2009).

Meetings of SHG women are also sites for motivating Dalits to cultivate new *gaairan* lands. Such mobilisation is facilitated through fiery speeches by Awad and other MHA leaders and workers who motivate Dalits, particularly Mangs, to encroach upon *gaairan* and live a life of self-respect.

Workers of MHA would term the Mangs of Bogalwadi village as *gulams* (slaves). When they tried to persuade Mangs here for encroaching the *gaairan* for *swabhiman* (self-respect), only few youth showed interest. Most feared a Vanjari [another landowning higher caste that is ranked lower than the Marathas] backlash and also felt that encroaching upon the rocky *gaairan* will not be economically viable. (Field notes: 22 April 2009)

While MHA activists are aware of the challenges regarding the economic viability of *gaairan*, encroachment is also encouraged as a process challenging the sociopolitical dominance of Marathas and Vanjaris and the control they exert over Dalits in general and Mangs in particular. LPCs at the village, circle, taluka and district levels included *gaairan* occupants (men and women) as part of their advocacy component. These committees are meant to ensure that the *gaairan* occupiers have the required knowledge of various documents and processes necessary for securing legal entitlements and for them to take the lead in the JAA movement.

Although funded by IO, these meetings are similar to other Dalit sociopolitical gatherings in their ritual commemoration of Dalit symbols and leaders, as the following extracts from one such meeting show. ‘When Awad entered the meeting venue at LPC training meeting in Beed, one of the activists shouted slogans: “Eknath Awad *Tum Aage Bado* [Eknath Awad you lead us]” and some participants added “*Hum Tumare Sath Hai* [we are with you]”’ (Field notes: 20 August 2008). The activists urged

<sup>9</sup>Taluka is an administrative block.

the LPC members not to see themselves as ‘encroachers’, since the Nizam government<sup>10</sup> had allocated the grazing lands to them. At the same time, the LPC members were motivated by the activists to react violently if dominant castes turn repressive: “If you destroy our crops by rearing your cattle, we will not only cut your cattle and feast on them but we will also break your hands[ ... ]”. You should gain such strength; this is the objective of this training camp’ (Speech recorded: 20 August 2008). This meeting ended in the formation of the district LPC in Beed, amid slogans in praise of past heroes and against injustices against Dalits. Such assertive mobilisation of Dalits around the issue of *gaairan* has contributed to them (particularly Mangs) challenging their lower social and economic status in the villages.

### ***Politicisation of Caste Relations***

Dalit cultivation on *gaairan* lands leads to the politicisation of relations between Dalits and the dominant castes at a grassroots level. However, it is not just Dalits who encroach upon *gaairan*. In T village, a Maratha farmer who owns land neighbouring the *gaairan* encroached around 3 acres long before the Mangs began to cultivate the land in 2004. Nevertheless, it is only the cultivation by Dalits that is challenged by Marathas. In the same village, an attempt by Dalits to cultivate *gaairan* land in 1992 was unsuccessful as the Marathas threatened Dalits with dire consequences; some Dalits were beaten up and had to flee the village.

Not all instances of Dalits encroachment result in conflicts with dominant castes. The long history of Dalit movement struggles for *gaairan* has had some impact, as have the GRs that recognised encroachments as legal. In some villages the dominant castes themselves ‘distribute’ the *gaairan* to select Dalits so as to sustain patron–client relationships. As part of collecting documentary evidence, workers of MHA try to convince the *gram panchayats* to provide a ‘No Objection Certificate’ for legal transfer of ownership to encroachers. An interesting case is that of PP village. The *gaairan* land in this village had been

<sup>10</sup>The Nizam government in the mid-1940s was positively inclined towards the development of *pasta kaum* (depressed classes/untouchables). See Kakade (1990: 87–89) on some political efforts of Nizam to attract untouchables towards Islam and to support *Ittehad* (a Muslim Loyalist Organisation).

encroached in 1970, facilitated by a CPI (M) worker. The cultivators, who were from various castes,<sup>11</sup> had surrendered the encroachments after being arrested. Following the release of the cultivators, the land was brought under the control of the Forest Department. An MHA activist from this village mobilised thirty five Dalit families (thirty-four Mang and one Mahar) to cultivate the *gaairan* again in May 2009. Once again, the Dalit encroachers were arrested. Interestingly, on this occasion, leaders from dominant castes came to the rescue of Dalits. The dominant castes in PP are divided politically between NCP and BJP, which struggle to control the village panchayat. Both parties supported the encroachments and helped the Dalit cultivators secure bail on their arrest. Their motivation for this support was securing the united Dalit vote (a total of 300 votes) which is crucial in deciding the village election results.

In X village the Mahars had encroached upon the *gaairan* long before 1991, so their encroachments were legalised after the 1991 GR, whereas some Mangs encroached upon the *gaairan* in 2002. After the 1991 GR, Dalits had used police and court records as evidence of their encroachments, as the village revenue officer did not record encroachment/cultivation on *gaairan* by Dalits in most cases. The later Mang encroachers were disappointed that the Marathas had not opposed this process as the lack of opposition also meant a lack of legal recognition/records that the land is occupied by the Mangs currently (Field notes: 1 June 2009).

The MHA workers also support the cultivation of *gaairan* land by Dalits through symbolic gestures like putting up boards of the MHA branch in the village and giving speeches in support of *gaairan* encroachments on special commemorative occasions. They sustain the ritual practice of lobbying at local police stations to register cases of violence or opposition (such as destroying standing crops or social boycott) by the dominant castes to *gaairan* cultivation under the SC/ST (PoA) Act. Like other Dalit movements, MHA emphasises caste as the reason for the opposition to and exclusion of Dalits. This allegation is systemically denied by the social and political formations of the dominant castes and even by the executive and judiciary.

<sup>11</sup>This was clear from the surnames in the court order of the judicial magistrate dated 28 August 1970, which ordered ten days rigorous imprisonment and a fine of ₹50 for each encroacher. I also interviewed the CPI (M) worker involved.

## Between Procedural Advocacy and Substantive Caste Politics: State against Dalit Land Rights?

Another important element of the project that RDC is implementing under JAA is advocacy with the state government for policy impact. This section examines the advocacy efforts of MHA to secure land titles and the nexus between dominant caste and state institutions that delay and deny land regularisation for Dalits.

Advocacy as practised by NGOs is distinguishable from popular campaigning as the latter involves large numbers of people and the former does not. However, the two are often intertwined. In the case of MHA's advocacy, popular campaigning has been its core strength, which has attracted the attention of the state authorities on the issue of *gaairan* land. This has also helped MHA (and RDC's leader Awad) to consolidate its position in the local electoral politics of Beed. The state response has been a mixture of support, repression, inaction and co-optation. While violent displacements are just one part of the political dynamics, the procedural engagement with the state involves long, drawn-out and delayed processes that generally do not work in the favour of *gaairan* occupants.

### Support

Organising mass rallies and protests to show the strength of *gaairan* encroachers is an important strategy that sits well with the advocacy initiatives that IO supports. As part of advocacy under JAA, MHA has been actively lobbying the state government to regularise encroached *gaairan* by Dalits. In 2004, rallies supporting the Constitution (known as Sanvidhan rallies) were organised across districts in Marathwada, in which MHA speakers claimed that the government had insulted the 'Constitution of Dr Ambedkar' by not regularising encroached *gaairan* and forest lands (Interview, Awad on TV station Zee Marathi: 14 April 2004). Advocacy efforts and displays of numerical strength have helped to consolidate Eknath Awad's image as a mass leader, particularly from the point of view of party politics.

As part of its advocacy work under JAA, MHA had—by November 200—filed with the government 22,482 cases of encroachments that could be legalised (with affidavits and evidence collected through RDC), claiming that these encroachments occurred before 1990. A meeting with

Sharad Pawar (president of the NCP) and Revenue Minister Narayan Rane took place in Mumbai in November 2008 to discuss possible action on the files submitted under JAA. At this meeting, Awad requested the Minister's consideration, as he presented the case of poor and landless Dalits who were given fallow lands for cultivation by the Nizam government in 1946. However, the discussion was brought back to the 1991 GR of the modern (Maratha) state:

Narayan Rane asked Awad how many cultivators of the cases submitted were occupants before 1990 [ ... ] Awad replied that most were before 1990 [ ... ] Rane responding to Pawar's persuasion proposed a *mohim* (campaign) in this meeting to deal with these cases on a priority basis. Discussion on lands other than *gaairan* cultivated by Dalits was not encouraged in this meeting [ ... ] Rane also maintained that earlier efforts of giving land to Dalits had resulted in Dalits selling their land for alcohol. (Field notes: 16 November 2008)

Awad was visibly elated on this day, but moves to regularise *gaairan* cultivation were much slower than expected. Initially, this was due to a larger crisis that faced the state, in the form of attacks by gunmen in south Mumbai in November 2008. While the promise was made that all the cases would be dealt with as part of a campaign, in the follow-up meeting held with the state revenue minister in Aurangabad in February 2009, the minister stated that only 10 per cent of the cases would be taken up before the parliamentary elections of May 2009 and that evidence of encroachment prior to 1990 would be sought. It was also made clear by the officers that affidavits filed after 1990 by MHA will not be considered as evidence of encroachment/cultivation before 1990.

### ***Inaction***

One of the non-Dalit workers at RDC mocked these meetings with the ministers over *gaairan* ownership. He asked me sarcastically, referring to the above meeting, 'did you not go [for a meeting] for securing *gaairan* ownership?', as if one meeting was good enough to secure *gaairan* ownership (Field notes: 22 February 2009). State technologies work in various ways, not only against the possibilities of regularisation but also against continued cultivation of the *gaairan*. While meetings of MHA leaders with ministers raised hopes of legal entitlements, revenue commissioners were simultaneously threatening eviction. The divisional

commissioner of Aurangabad issued orders to vacate the encroachments on *gaairan* by 18 October 2009. Senior MHA activists in Beed organised immediately to submit a letter to the DC warning of mass protests if the encroachments of poor landless Dalits and Adivasis were removed. The letter also demanded that the illegal encroachments by owners of sugar factories, private educational institutions and the government be first vacated, before the encroachments of Dalits.

An important outcome of lobbying by MHA during my fieldwork was an order from the DC's office dated 9 January 2009 asking the Tahasildars to survey the cultivations on encroachments and to record them in government land records. These orders do not automatically translate into action at the taluka and village level and protest marches had to be organised in talukas to pressurise the Tahasildars into acting. The Tahasildars of some talukas in Beed responded by issuing orders to their staff, the talathis, to survey and register the encroachments from the list submitted by MHA. Despite these orders to enumerate all cultivations on the *gaairans* and to record them irrespective of dates, the talathis did not actively pursue this task. They were said to have been 'pressurised by officers and local politicians verbally to avoid official recording of encroachments' (Informal discussion, MHA activist: 1 February 2010). The Maharashtra Land Revenue Code 1966 requires the revenue officials to enter encroachments in land records immediately on witnessing them. The state authorities, however, deal with the old and new *gaairan* encroachments by neither entering them in government records nor by evicting them, but rather by maintaining a passive silence.

## Repression

After the GR of 1991, the *gram panchayats* controlled by dominant castes had actively allocated *gaairan* lands for social forestry to avoid cultivation of these lands by Dalits. Forests come under the purview of central government, thus, making it harder for Dalits to resist displacement from *gaairan* land. Guru (1995) points out changes in the nature of violent displacements of Dalits from *gaairan* encroachments from the 1980s onwards, in the context of the crisis of Maratha hegemony. He notes that the 1980s and 1990s witnessed violent displacement of the Dalits by non-state forms of repression, with direct Maratha participation; after 1991, the state took over the task through *gram panchayats*. The distinction, however, is largely blurred and Maratha control of state

institutions works to their advantage in displacing Dalits from *gaairan* lands. In D village, for instance, the Tahasildar had read out the land possession records in the *gram sabha* meeting and declared the cultivation of *gaairan* by Dalits to be illegal. He asked the *gram panchayat* to vacate the *gaairan*, thus, giving Marathas (who control the panchayat) the authority to vacate the land cultivated by Dalits.

The state machinery is particularly repressive when it comes to forest lands, leading to situations of conflict; at times, locally dominant castes align with the state. The land in K village is identified as belonging to the Forest Department. Dalit cultivators from the village had to face earth excavation machines on their *gaairan* which were meant for planting trees under social forestry. The encroachers were reluctant to resist, because of the dominance of Vanjaris in the village. The (female) officer at the Social Forestry Department was a Vanjari and had the support of local Vanjaris from the village (Field notes: 26 May 2009). Peaceful protests do not always help Dalit encroachers; aggressive resistance or performance of symbolic violence is also part of MHA's set of strategies. In Osmanabad District, when forest officials forcefully entered encroached *gaairan* land with the police, revenue department officials, *gram panchayat* members and JCB (excavation) machinery for planting trees, Awad suggested that the workers create a 'law and order' situation and asked the encroachers to stop the plantation or to uproot the planted trees (Field notes: 9 June 2009).

### **Co-optation**

As part of rights advocacy, the JAA project aimed to build non-political (party) leadership amongst Dalits in the context of globalisation. This measure fits within the depoliticisation thesis reviewed earlier. Whether Dalit movements should follow the path of political power and party politics is a matter of debate within Dalit movements (Jaoul 2007). However, as suggested earlier, the distinction between political and non-political is difficult to maintain due to the centrality of state and democratic politics in Dalit resistance. The obligation under the JAA project to be 'non-political', remained a difficult one for MHA in practice. This can be seen in Eknath Awad's political trajectory.

Awad's first introduction to Dalit movements was through the DPs. After their collapse, Awad joined BAMCEF and BSP; he claims to have learned the importance of 'political' (party) power from BSP. He contested

the general elections of 1998 as a BSP candidate and was the vice president of BSP in Maharashtra until 2001. In that year, he withdrew from BSP and formed a political party (not registered), the Bahujan Majoor Paksha (BMP) to mobilise the Mangs. The BMP received a good reception in Marathwada, particularly in Beed. BMP entered into an alliance with BJP in 2004 to counter the NCP, as NCP was promoting Mang leaders from outside Beed to check the growth of MHA/BMP. This alliance was successful, causing the defeat of a powerful NCP candidate in Beed during the assembly election of 2004.

Although Awad has not contested elections since 1998, the mass mobilisation of MHA for *gaairan* cultivation (under JAA) attracted the attention of top leaders of NCP. The local leaders of NCP also made peace with MHA, realising its strategic importance. A family member of Awad was elected member of the District Council on an NCP ticket in 2007. Awad has also been hoping to secure a Member of Legislative Council (upper house) nomination from NCP or other parties for his 'social work'. Although alliance with NCP has helped Awad extend his patronage amongst Dalits, particularly Mangs, MHA's increasing co-optation into NCP may also affect its extra-institutional politics. Most local conflicts or cases of violence against Dalits are carried out by dominant castes, particularly Marathas; Dalit movements lose their political autonomy by joining dominant caste political parties. Dalit movement leaders come under pressure for not raising Dalit issues or caste violence once they join Maratha parties. Thus, the Maratha political parties like NCP represent a more serious risk for the depoliticisation of Dalit politics than NGOs and INGOs.

## Fractured Governmentalities and Persistent Dalit Protest

The MHA is rooted in complex local development processes and politics, its intersections with I/NGOs and human rights discourse/advocacy for Dalit rights have not resulted in its depoliticisation. The MHA activism may have failed to secure legal recognition for lands cultivated by Dalits. However, like other Dalit political formations, MHA has ensured support for Dalits who cultivate *gaairan*; it has specifically encouraged Mangs to venture into cultivation of public lands; and it has helped Dalits to file legal documents with the state about their cultivation of *gaairan* lands.



The mobilisation strategies of MHA and the advocacy vision of IO were not always in agreement. In some villages, forest land encroachments have been supported by MHA. This may seem contrary to the objective of sustainable livelihoods under JAA, but the process of vernacularising global practices also resulted in some being undermined to suit the local context. It has been argued that the top-down planning and funding and upwards accountability practices of NGOs negate participation: 'NGOs may, thus, replicate patron-client relationships' (Fisher 1997: 456). The case of MHA does not totally reverse this thesis, as Dalit activists may seem like patrons for Dalit cultivators of *gaairan*; however, they also act as mediators of state access and justice for Dalits.

This study on the intersections of transnational civil society and grassroots Dalit organisations demonstrates that universal values and local specificities need not be the cause of conflictual divergence. Dalit politics and the close links that grassroots Dalit movements have developed with the international human rights regime do not affect the autonomy of Dalit movements, which continue to centre around state and caste locally. For IO, there have been some disappointments in its collaboration with MHA: one is the attraction of the MHA activists to party politics, while another is the leader-centred nature of MHA/JAA. Since 2009, the IO has been trying to make JAA a 'people's movement', by delegating leadership and planning roles to *gaairan* cultivators.

Local development politics in India works through a complex mix of social identities, civil society and patronage/corruption. The functioning of MHA as a leader-centred Dalit (or Mang) caste association with international networks and its sustained vernacular caste politics suggests that the sovereignty of Dalit politics is not eroded by the alliance with I/NGOs. However, the growth of autonomous Dalit activism in MHA has seen powerful Maratha parties trying to co-opt MHA. This is a political challenge that all autonomous Dalit movements (both political and non-political) face with their growth. How MHA deals with such pressures and what implications its alliance with NCP will have for Dalit or Mang politics remains to be seen.

The MHA's mobilisation around land rights blurs the distinction between caste, civil society and state. It also challenges the perception that neo-liberal governmentality in the form of I/NGOs necessarily depoliticises public interests. Such a fear seems misplaced in the case of Dalit movements whose politics continues to be autonomous and competitive. Many of the Dalit movements still remain outside the bounds of

NGOs; their associations and voluntary public spirit does not depend on INGO grants. Dalit movements in Marathwada represent a cacophony of voices that cooperate (and compete) while resorting to varied strategies to address recognition and redistribution concerns of Dalits. These mobilisations are full of contradictions in a context in which the procedural emphasis is on 'getting the Constitution to work' and the substantive politics involves the use of symbolic violence and other strategies that are considered effective from the marginal location of Dalits.

We need to be cautious of over-exaggerating the democratisation processes while analysing the role of international civil society players. Appadurai's (2001) concept of 'deep democracy' includes a broad distinction of grassroots political movements into 'armed solutions' and 'partnership-partnership' (between traditionally opposed groups such as states, corporations and workers). Such a distinction may prevent a nuanced understanding of the violence and exclusions that Dalits face in localised contexts, of Dalit agency that encompasses peaceful or violent politics of resistance and of the continued importance of the state in these processes.

To conclude, in current globalised times and spaces, the political rationality of transnational governmentality (in this case INGOs) and that of the Indian state on Dalit issues are not in absolute cohesion. I/NGOs, besides advocating better technologies for reaching out to Dalits, are not particularly influenced by the micro-technologies of dominant caste-classes that the state is trapped in; thereby giving Dalits more room for manoeuvre. Such manoeuvring and vernacularisation of new rights technologies of global actors by MHA have contributed to bringing *gaairan* to the centre of local politics in Marathwada. *Gaairan* and its cultivation, *jayanti* celebrations, temple entry protests and mobilisation against caste atrocities by Dalit movements, are crucial sites that politicise caste and initiate processes that challenge the dominant micro-technologies of power.

# 5

## The Imagined ‘Bahujan’

### Caste and Cultural Repertoires of BSP

In our country, there are people who believe in various castes and religions. But within these, the SCs, STs and OBCs under the varna system—the casteist (*jatiwadi*) social system—did not have equal rights to progress in every walk of life or to lead a life with *maan sammaan* (dignity). Meaning these classes (uses word *varga* [class]) did not have equal rights of education, jobs, farming or business, voting or even contesting elections. But there were various saints and great men amongst Dalits and OBCs who opposed this unequal social system, the varna system.

(Mayawati’s speech, 15 March 2010)<sup>1</sup>

Mayawati opened her speech with the above lines in a massive rally at Lucknow to commemorate twenty five years of BSP’s formation, where the number of participants was estimated by the mainstream media to be around one to two million people. The ‘Bahujan’ centric orientation of BSP was reaffirmed in this rally. The anti-varna rhetoric of Mayawati and her affirmation of Bahujan symbols, leaders and ideology and simultaneous rejection of Gandhi and Congress were a matter of debate during the next few weeks in the English-language mass media. They debated two issues following this event. One was the huge garland of currency notes that Mayawati was presented on this occasion. The other was whether the BSP was reverting to a ‘Dalit’ political agenda

<sup>1</sup>Speech accessed from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Em7PvREoTiw> (accessed on 26 August 2010).

and was abandoning the much-celebrated Dalit-Brahman combine. Mayawati's referring to the varna system caused a kind of panic in the middle class and they responded with public deliberations over the 'vulgar' display of wealth and her parochial Dalit (not Bahujan) agenda.

The 'Bahujan' character of BSP has been a matter of debate in academic circles and its formation a challenge for BSP cadres. Jaffrelot (2003: 497–498) contests Pai's (2002) claim that BSP in 1990s developed a Dalit-oriented policy. He presents BSP as a Bahujan party in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, and observes, 'Kanshi Ram continuously tried to transform the party into the crucible of the Bahujan samaj, by aggregating the Dalits, OBCs and, to a lesser extent, the Tribals and Muslims'. Similarly, Chandra (2000) explores the multi-ethnic character of BSP in Hoshiarpur. She suggests that BSP is a multi-ethnic party that makes 'overt' appeals (compared to Congress' 'covert' appeals) to ethnic identity and its comparative ability to provide political representation to non-privileged groups led to its rise over Congress.

Recent research on BSP in north India suggests BSP to be not a party of Dalits or Bahujans but a 'catch-all party' (Jaffrelot 2006). While the non-Dalit vote-base of BSP can be termed volatile, the Dalit vote has largely remained intact; in the 2009 general elections more than half of BSP's electorate were Dalits (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2009). In Maharashtra too, most of BSP's support comes from Dalits, mostly Mahars (Palshikar 2007). The BSP, however, attempts to achieve the imagined Bahujan collective in Maharashtra and the present chapter deals with the processes of BSP's mobilisation and persuasion across castes.

While the previous two chapters followed Dalit mobilisation and activism around state for securing justice, the present exemplifies the processes and politics of forming emancipatory collective identities beyond specific jatis in Dalit movements. In this chapter, I explore the making of Bahujan in BSP and the use of caste and cultural repertoires in this process. Some of the key questions that I address here are, what are the BSP's grassroots strategies of mobilising Dalits and non-Dalits? How are caste differences within Dalits and Dalits versus other communities dealt with? A key question of relevance here is, does BSP indulge in anti-caste politics? Instead of an instrumental approach followed by Pai (2002) who focusses on the macro *mobilisational* strategies (electoral and coalitional) of BSP and Chandra (2004), who explores ethnic favouritism in the Indian patronage democracy, I pursue here a qualitative approach to explore the formation of the 'Bahujan' collective identity at the grassroots in Marathwada. By reference to social movement studies the focus here is

on the construction of 'we-feeling' or community (Melucci 1989, Goringe 2005). While engaging with caste and cultural repertoires of BSP, I also critique and expand ideas on substantialisation of caste and in doing so I contribute to the third moment of theorising caste.<sup>2</sup>

Following the interface of caste and democracy in postcolonial politics, scholars revisited the ideas of 'rigidity' and 'structural' focus in study of caste, to underemphasise its 'ritual' basis in publics and politics. Castes had moved from being a part of structure to become increasingly substantialised. This substantialisation of castes indicated a major movement of caste from structure to substance. Dumont explained it as follows:

[T]he transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, no firm units, to a universe of improbable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which the caste appears as a collective *individual* (in the sense we have given to this word), as a substance. (Dumont 1980: 222)

Castes thus turned into impenetrable autonomous political blocks that compete and cooperate with each other. Substantialisation and the rise of caste associations marked the possibility of inter-caste political alliances irrespective of status concerns (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960). Caste federations were seen as a step beyond caste associations that helped in secularisation and formation of political community (Kothari and Rushikesh 1965). Bayly (1999: 306), however, suggests that caste groups function as pressure groups or lobbies of sorts, emphasising their propensities 'towards rivalry and antagonism'.

What are the forms of political community/ies that emerge with the substantialisation of caste? And what impact do these have on tolerance building across castes? Fuller (1996) suggests that the new symbols of Hindu identity are increasingly transmuted into new symbols of caste identity. Such constructions of caste may not necessarily bring tolerance

<sup>2</sup>Jodhka (2010) summarises three key moments in theorisation of caste, the first moment of culture offered a book view (largely Orientalist), second was moment of politics that studied interaction of caste and democracy (substantialisation of caste) and the third moment witnessed rise of autonomous Dalit politics and possibilities of theorising caste from below. He argues that the third moment clarified that 'caste collectivities do not participate as equals, even in modern democratic politics'.

of difference across castes as hoped by Kothari (1965). Nor would they affect hierarchies of caste in public spaces, they may instead aid consolidation of Hindutva politics. A related question that I pursue here is, therefore, on the role of Dalit politics in substantialisation of caste and its impact on caste hierarchies. This question becomes particularly pertinent, as Dalit movements do not participate as equals in the civic sphere and they claim to have anti-caste ideological groundings.

Kanshiram had argued and mobilised for the formation of a broader political community that he called Bahujan (I discussed this in Chapter Two) with Dalits and an Ambedkarite ideology at its core. He avoided the concept 'Dalit', preferring to use the term 'Bahujan' from the very beginning, utilising Phule's analogy of Shudra-atishudra versus Aryans (Brahmans). On the other hand, the BSP has clearly moved beyond its *Mulniwasi* (Bahujans as indigenous people) and anti-Aryan (Brahmans and other castes) rhetoric and the scale of overt attacks on upper castes has come down. A closer look at the portion of Mayawati's speech that I began with unravels the complex dynamism in BSP's (anti?) caste politics. Varna is constructed as an 'absolute' hierarchical system by Mayawati, whereas castes are recognised as discrete categories with varied beliefs and ideology, caste categories that are part of the 'constitutional' scheme, i.e., SC, ST and OBC are imagined as humiliated and deprived 'Bahujans' and their 'various' saints and traditions are said to have challenged the varna system. While the mainstream media represented the anti-varna rhetoric (and public display of wealth) of Mayawati as synonymous with a Dalit political agenda, they ignored her continuous reference to the Constitution and to cultural traditions of protest carried out by Bahujan saints and *mahapurushs*. It is this strategic merger of tradition and modern that I explore at length in this chapter.

Dalit and OBC cadres of BSP from Beed attended this large-scale commemoration rally addressed by Mayawati in Lucknow. They had paid from their limited resources to be part of this commemoration. An instrumentalist approach cannot explain this voluntary spirit of BSP. Like Kanshiram and Mayawati, the BSP cadres in their local praxis emphasise the collective identity of 'Bahujan' who represent 85 per cent of population and not 'Dalit'. But they also mobilise around caste identities like those of Mang, Boudha (Mahar) and Charmakar as they attempt to forge this imagined Bahujan collective. It is this tension and fusion of particular (jati) and collective (Bahujan) in the formation of anti-caste Bahujan collective that I present in this chapter. I detail here the mobilisation strategies of BSP in Marathwada, considering carefully the use of caste as cultural

and ideological material in the construction of 'Bahujan' collective identity where Dalits are at the core of these mobilisation processes. I argue that BSP's caste repertoires strategically deal with both the 'difference' and 'hierarchical' elements of caste and construct counter-politics where cultural-ideological roots of every caste are identified in anti-caste histories thus contributing to the deepening of Ambedkarite politics. Thus, the dynamism of BSP's sociocultural mobilisation and its version of anti-caste politics are also linked to the dynamism of caste hierarchy itself.

This chapter begins by briefly presenting the centrality of Ambedkar and Ambedkarism in electoral and Dalit politics of Maharashtra, where the factions of RPI have come to be synonymous with Ambedkarism. Though they engage in assertive Dalit politics they are also seen as parties specifically associated with Mahar radicalism. It is in this context that BSP tries to move beyond Mahars to include other Dalits and non-Dalits in its fold. In the following sections, I describe the BSP's attempts in Beed to mobilise three social categories—Chambers, OBCs and Muslims—and present the accommodative and strategic mobilisation of BSP cadres to challenge the identity of BSP as the party of 'untouchables'. BSP's Ambedkarism is, thus, broad-based so as to include dissenting Dalits and non-Dalits to form a Bahujan collective from below that has anti-caste cultural groundings.

## **Mahar Politics: Voting for RPI as Religion and Ambedkar as God**

The major challenge for consolidation of non-Dalit support for BSP in Maharashtra is the relatively low population of Dalits (11 per cent as compared to 21 per cent in UP) and the presence of various competing Dalit Party (RPI) factions that have a longer history and who claim a direct lineage from Ambedkar. The non-Mahar Dalits have largely remained outside the purview of RPI influence. Varied factions of RPI called themselves the true heirs of Ambedkar and were identified mostly with Mahars. Voting for RPI (or their alliance partners) in post-Ambedkar phase thus came to be intertwined with Ambedkarism and Ambedkarite politics. This constructed local Dalit politics well before the emergence of the BSP in Maharashtra.

Some elder supporters of RPI I spoke to felt that not voting for RPI was like betraying Ambedkar. Assertive Mahars affiliated with

the various RPI factions ended up voting for the alliance partners of RPI—mostly Congress. Some others had lost hope in electoral politics because, as they saw it, the RPI had fallen into an 'alliance trap'. For example, Dhammananda is a staunch Ambedkarite in her mid-fifties who did not vote in elections anymore. *'You have to become lachar (helpless) if you vote for them; we will have to bow in front of them.'* She considered the old and united RPI as 'our' party and added, *'I will support RPI till I die, as it is Babasaheb's party'* (Field notes: 13 April 2009). The RPI not being united and not having an independent identity in contesting elections meant for Dhammananda that no other party could represent Ambedkar and his ideology. Due to lack of Dalit unity and the missing unified 'Ambedkar's RPI', Dhammananda preferred to stay away from voting.

While Dhammananda has given up voting, others have taken one of the factions of RPI as the path that Ambedkarite Dalits should follow. While some Mahars merge Ambedkar and Buddha with other Hindu Gods for worshipping (Ganguly 2004), other Mahars, however, strictly worship Ambedkar and Buddha, preferring to reject Hindu Gods and rituals in totality. They have merged Ambedkar, Buddha and the Constitution to construct a new kind of bhakti where the old gods are replaced with modern gods and symbols. There is, thus, an internal critique and competition for being 'true' Ambedkarites within Dalit politics.

Kailash, a BSP worker from Mahar caste, commented critically on the commitment that turns RPI into a kind of religion. 'Yes, some of our people are like that, they would even worship Babasaheb's dog as a god.' (Field notes: 9 April 2009). BSP workers on the other hand, follow Kanshiram in criticising RPI's tendency to work only among the Dalits and even more especially amongst the Buddhist Mahars. Following Kanshiram, they term RPI's Ambedkarists as *chamchas* who are also labelled as *gulams*. Shantabai Salave in her early sixties has travelled from voting for CPI when it was strong, through Congress (RPI alliance) and is presently a BSP supporter. Before voting for BSP she voted where the *samaj* [Mahars] voted under the influence of their leaders [called *pudharis* locally]. She had moved to BSP after attending some cadre camps organised in the village. The supporters of BSP consider its politics to be better than the RPI groups particularly because of its independence from non-Ambedkarite parties.

S: Why not support RPI?

SS: They go to Congress-BJP.

S: What is wrong if one goes to Congress-BJP?



SS: No, no [ ... ] It has to be 'all Ambedkar'. Our people contest in Congress and we think that they are ours (*aapale*). But they are sold out for money [ ... ] I tell these boys whatever mark [votes] you get is fine. Why go after money? RPI too is ours but they follow their [Congress] wishes. It is like we are cleaning at their place. This is how I feel [laughs]. (Interview: 5 March 2009)

The Ambedkarism of BSP, thus, is not radically distinct from groups like RPI as Ambedkar is at the centre of all their political processes and imaginations. The cadre of BSP proudly reminds Dalits that the symbol of 'elephant', Ambedkar had chosen for RPI was 'lost' by the factions of RPI as they could not garner enough votes and the BSP 'got it back'. The cadres, however, move beyond the critique of RPI to target major political parties and their ideology as inspired by '*Manuwad*'.

In political rallies as well as cadre camps the workers and leaders of BSP rework history to remind their listeners that universal adult franchise in India was a gift from Ambedkar so that even poor, un-propertied and uneducated people shall decide who the 'rulers' can be. 'Selling' one's vote for money, liquor or meat distributed by dominant parties is therefore considered as a step against, or betrayal (*dokha*) of Ambedkar. All non-BSP parties are seen as non/anti-Ambedkarite, who naturally lack the quest for implementing (Ambedkar's) Constitution of India. The Constitution of Ambedkar is thus turned into a 'manifesto' of BSP.

Jogdand [District Secretary of BSP in Beed and a Mang] recalled a speech in 1993 of Kanshiram where he spoke on how to implement Ambedkarism [ ... ] For Ambedkarism to be implemented the Constitution has to be implemented properly. If the Constitution is implemented, India will become a great country in the world, but how does one implement the Constitution? That is what BSP is doing. BSP is the only political party in the world that comes to power without any manifesto. (Field notes: 21 January 2009)

Mobilisation around such Ambedkarite emotions and hopes has seen voters of BSP spending money from their limited means, either directly contributing to the party or paying for their own travel to participate in rallies and meetings. Evoking voluntary spirit in party politics is not merely a function of reworking 'true' Ambedkarite ideology in BSP's mobilisation and involves strategic use of caste pride. Communal anti-caste histories and their intersections with class issues also contribute in consolidating support for BSP.

## Making of the 'Bahujan' Collective Identity: Merging Humiliation and Deprivation

Chandra (2000) observes that humiliation and not deprivation is conceived as 'the' problem in BSP and the cure is seen in political representation and not material benefits. The cadres of BSP in Marathwada similarly emphasised humiliation and a quest for self-respect as important reasons for their passionate voluntary engagement in BSP. They incorporate class issues and aspirations in their repertoires, however, in order to situate the material deprivation of Bahujans, particularly Dalits, within the cultural repertoires of contention that construct '*Manu*' and *Manuwad* as the 'other'. The other is not in any caste or community but framed as ideology of *Manuwad*. One of the elder members of BSP explained the intersections of poverty with *Manuwad*.

It is a *chakravyuha* [cyclical trap], you are supposed to be resourceless according to the Manu Smriti and the effects we still see [ ... ] Things have changed now, there is no direct *jatiwad* [casteism] but there is indirect *jatiwad*. In places where they cannot stop us we have moved ahead but our pace of progress is very slow. (Interview: 3 February 2010)

The participants and supporters of BSP do not merely rally around BSP because they respond to the issues of humiliation and self-respect. They hope to better their lives through such support. Machindra Paike is a marginal farmer from Chinchala village who also works as a labourer on other farms. He explained:

If the BSP came to power in all of India everyone will progress personally [*vyaktigat*] and all the schemes and plans will be implemented as per Babasaheb's Constitution. None of these are implemented properly so far. If this happens all people will progress [*vikas*] including the poor. (Interview: 23 September 2008)

The BSP in Maharashtra is dominated by Mahar Buddhists but the Buddhist/Mahar and other cadres of BSP make efforts to mobilise support beyond to form a Bahujan collective. Phule-Ambedkarism and anti-Manu emotions are mobilised amongst non-Mahars and the use of caste repertoires is central in the strategies of BSP. Each caste is constructed here as a victim of *Manuwad* and specific caste histories are mobilised through symbols that fit the anti-caste discourses. The workers of BSP

also claim to pursue Ambedkarite politics, which includes ‘Annihilation of caste’—a text written by Ambedkar that is supposed to have influenced Kanshiram. Though BSP in Maharashtra is dominated by Mahar-Buddhists, the formation of a Buddhist collective identity through en masse conversion is not at the centre of BSP’s political performances or mobilisation strategies. However, the cadres mobilise in bhakti mode, constructing discrete ideologies of protest, which are close to Buddhist principles.<sup>3</sup>

The focus is on mobilisation of varied caste/s (and religions) into a collective identity of ‘Bahujan’ with Dalits at the core. The ‘85–15 formula’ of Kanshiram, as cadres generally refer to, constructs Bahujan and the non-Bahujans.<sup>4</sup> The term Bahujan is given culturo-historical grounding by invoking its usage by Buddha and Phule. On the other hand, Bahujans are also constructed as deprived castes and such deprivation is linked to their dispossession of ‘political’ power in recent (colonial and postcolonial times).

Self-respect and self-rule are merged in the public discourses of BSP; self-respect is associated with recognition claims for the specific castes and anti-caste leaders and self-rule (through BSP) is presented as a necessity for securing self-respect—something that has been denied due to the dominance of the Congress in the colonial and postcolonial politics. ‘Bahujan’ is, thus, an imagined collective identity constructed by using caste and fragmented caste histories. Bahujan socio-cultural history is not presented as one of deprivation; the stories of anti-caste protests in bhakti are selectively used to suit varied contexts and castes. Thus, the usage of symbolic history varied from pre-colonial anti-caste symbols like Buddha, Ashoka, Kabir and Ravidas to the colonial icons like that of Phule, Shahu and Ambedkar. The effort of the cadre is towards formation of an ideological alliance amongst the Bahujan (who have been divided and humiliated by *Manu* and mainstream political parties) through the use of diverse histories and symbolism.

The BSP’s coming to power with a full majority in UP’s 2007 assembly elections (with support from Brahmans) created a visible

<sup>3</sup>The RPI’s critique of Mayawati and Kanshiram is that of them not converting to Buddhism. Kanshiram had vowed to convert to Buddhism in October 2006 with lakhs of followers but he passed away in March 2006. His final rites were carried out by Mayawati using Buddhist rituals.

<sup>4</sup>In UP, following the success of BSP in 2007, there was a talk of ‘*sarvajan*’. Though castes higher in order joined BSP, the mobilisation discourse of BSP continued to emphasise Bahujan.

stir in the politics of Maharashtra.<sup>5</sup> The BSP's success was understood to be based on the formation of brotherhood (*bhaichara*) committees there. Dalit cadres in Maharashtra worked towards forming similar *bhaichara* committees to collectivise castes and communities through mobilising caste pride and use of (anti-) caste histories. As in UP, there was an attempt to involve the Brahmans as well, which met with some success. For instance, Bhonjal, a new Brahman entrant, also emphasised ideological and caste reasons for joining BSP:

You see it was five Brahmans who became the first disciples of Buddha. Buddha was a Kshatriya Raja and not a Mahar. Ananda, a Brahman, was Buddha's favourite disciple; there were no SCs here. You should also remember that Brahmans helped Phule in securing education and also in spreading education. (Field notes: 23 January 2009)

While the mainstream public sphere reacts regularly to BSP's political performances BSP workers and leaders do not engage with the mainstream public sphere. The BSP has developed and nurtured its own alternative public sphere, however, and that provides an effective means for the transmission of the party's political messages (Loynd 2008). Cadre trainings, political rallies, musical performances and alternative literature (books and CDs) are key sources and sites that constitute the alternative public sphere of the BSP. The literature sold is critical of the mainstream media, which is generally termed as *Manuwadi* by the cadre of BSP. Any public event of a medium or large-scale organised by BSP is accompanied by the sale of Dalit literature close to the venue. These books include Marathi and Hindi versions of Ambedkar's writings and other writings of scholars and journalists on Kanshiram, Mayawati and Ambedkar, small booklets critiquing Gandhi's life and politics, or detailing the life of Periyar or Phule. There are also booklets on the myth of 'Muslim pampering', detailing Muslim deprivation highlighted through the Sachar Committee.<sup>6</sup> Here, I focus on the politicised cultural frames that BSP constructs to mobilise varied castes against *Manuwad*. I will begin by presenting the case of Charmakars, followed by OBCs and Muslims.

<sup>5</sup>Chapter Seven will deal in detail with Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections of 2009.

<sup>6</sup>A committee formed by central government to study the socio-economic status of Muslims in India. The committee brought out the miserable Muslims presence in government services. Hindutva political parties criticised the formation, findings and recommendations of this committee.

## Chambers/Charmakars in Dalit Movements

The word 'Chambar' is increasingly seen as a derogatory term locally by Charmakar activists across sociopolitical formations. *Charma* means skin and Charmakar translates into one who skilfully works with or on skin. The work with skin is not considered as polluting, as was the case with the Mahars, who under Ambedkar's influence chose to move away from stigmatised occupations. Those Charmakars pursuing leather work or working as cobblers also refer to their work as *rohidasacha kaam* (work of Rohidas). Amongst the Charmakars, Ravidas<sup>7</sup> (also referred to locally as Rohidas) is a universal socio-religious symbol and can be assimilated both within the Brahmanic Hindu traditions and anti-caste Bhakti traditions.

While the Dalits in UP particularly have used the symbol of Ravidas as one of protest against caste Hindu traditions, thus making a movement from Bhakti to Buddha (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007), Ravidas still remains a Hindu symbol for the Charmakars in Maharashtra. Both in the past and present, the Charmakar leaders have largely opposed the alternative of conversion to Buddhism. While the Mahars attribute their social mobility to Ambedkarite ideology and Dalit movements, most Charmakars have been socially and educationally mobile without converting to Buddhism. The educated elite amongst Charmakars reject both the Mahar obsession with conversions to Buddhism and the identity of Dalit (or Hindu Dalit) and are more inclined towards identifying themselves as Hindus. Dr Bhosale, a professor of sociology at the University of Mumbai from the Charmakar caste has researched Charmakar organisations extensively and argues that the Charmakars had no good reason to be in favour of conversions and that the Mahars remain lowly in their eyes (Bhosale 2003). Dr Bhosale is regularly invited to speak at Rohidas Officers Social Association (ROSA) and other meetings; he shared some of his experiences.

They [ROSA] hardly discuss any social issues; rather they meet for match-making for their children. You tell me [he asked], how would an [educated/urban] Charmakar woman identify with what happened to

<sup>7</sup>Ravidas was a Bhakti saint during the fifteenth–sixteenth century from Chamar caste. He followed the sanskritisation mode of bhakti in contesting caste and continued to practice his caste profession. He never hid his caste, nor did he advocate religious conversions or following the upper castes (Ram 2008).

the woman in Khairlanji? I was called to speak on a Rohidas *jayanti* by Ramesh Medekar who is part of BJP... My idea of Buddha's path as an alternative was not liked at all. (Field notes: 17 September 2008)

Buddha and Ambedkar are the symbols associated with Mahars in local political culture as well as the politics of culture. While for some Dalits these symbols resemble assertion against their untouchable status, they have also become synonymous with the untouchable identity. Like the Mangs, Charmakars may oppose Ambedkarite ideology not only because Ambedkar was a Mahar and they reject Mahar dominance in Ambedkarite movements but also due to their proximity and comfort in Hindu beliefs and practices, particularly their higher social status as compared to Mahars. For Charmakars, to be associated with the symbols of Dalit protest like Ambedkar or Jai Bhim is not desirable, because they also render the possibility of their being identified with an 'invisible' untouchable identity.

It is such invisibility of oppression and oppressed identity as well as Brahmanic appropriation of Dalit existence and bodies that the BSP workers seek to challenge. Dalit suffering is thus linked in the discursive practice of BSP to Dalit bodies and minds, which they argue, are colonised by Brahmanic practices. Rao (2009: 268) has dealt with this aspect in detail and has argued that a twinned structure of denial and disclosure (of caste) gestures to the continued relevance of a corporeal politics. The case of Dalit denial of their lower status vis-à-vis caste inequality points to colonisation of Dalit psychic space (Oliver 2004: 28). BSP leaders emphasised the need for making these invisible identities of caste and status visible for forming the Bahujan identity.

Yes, annihilation of caste is the agenda of Ambedkarite movements. But where is caste? Caste is hidden. It is in the heart and brain. We have to make it visible. Why is it hidden? Because there is an inferiority complex. Convert inferiority into caste ego then they will not hide caste. This is psychological treatment and it began in this country with Ravidas. He ends every composition with *Kahe Ravidas Chamar* [so says Ravidas Chamar]. Ravidas has never hidden his caste. This was scientific treatment, a person who considers himself inferior, [you should] turn caste into [a matter of] pride for him. (Interview, Suresh Mane<sup>8</sup>: 10 February 2009)

<sup>8</sup>Suresh Mane is a senior leader of BSP from Maharashtra. He is the national general secretary of BSP and is also professor of law at Mumbai University.

Ravidas, thus, is a symbol of contention for competing political ideologies and groups as he can be interpreted as close to Hinduism (caste-Hindu traditions)<sup>9</sup> or as close to Ambedkar/Buddha vis-à-vis the Bahujan collective identity. Over the years, the BSP cadres have attracted Charmakars into the party through caste repertoires strategically mobilising opinion in favour of Ravidas (as one closer to Ambedkar and anti-caste thought). I will now move on to discuss the strategies of BSP involved in mobilisation of Charmakars who have been traditionally out of Ambedkarite movements.

### Charmakars in BSP

Most BSP supporters in Maharashtra consider the musical performances by Rahul Anvikar as more effective than the speeches of the cadre trainers or leaders. Rahul Anvikar is a 'star' performer and his arrival on the stage attracts applause from those who have heard him before. Rahul mixes music with movement talk that forges a link between the Bahujan ideologues from Buddha to Ambedkar with BSP (Kanshiram and Mayawati), adding a critique of major political formations like that of Congress and BJP. He also overtly engages with the caste of participants in his performances.<sup>10</sup>

As part of the Janhit Chetana (people's awareness) Rallies that were organised in all districts, Rahul Anvikar<sup>11</sup> performed in Beed on 22 September 2008 in front of around 8,000–10,000 participants. His song on how the heart of Congress was racing because of the growth of BSP saw some of the participants (including a woman) getting up and dancing in their places. Rahul particularly engaged overtly with the Mangs and Chambars present. He asked the participants, 'Are there any Mangs here?' Some of the Mang participants raised their hands. He asked the Mangs to be bold and not shy, 'I too am a Mang, do not be shy'. This

<sup>9</sup>See Khare (1985: 40–50) for differences between the caste Hindu and untouchable versions of the Ravidas legend.

<sup>10</sup>Narayan (2008) has termed these innovative uses of history as process of demarginalisation.

<sup>11</sup>There are not just public performances since some cadres/supporters organise performance for *samaj prabhodan* (awareness lecture) by Rahul Anvikar on personal familial occasions.

evoked laughter from the audience and also resulted in more Mangs raising their hands. He followed this up by emphasising that he was a Mang of Baba, Shahu and Phule and also added that *Matang* meant 'elephant' in Pali (as also in Sanskrit) resembling not just the symbol of BSP but also the power and strength of Mangs. He then sang a song on Annabhau and his role in making the life of Bahujans golden. He later moved to the Charmakars and asked, 'Are there any Chambars here?' Fewer hands compared to Mangs went up, but he added again, 'Do not be shy, I too am a Chambar', causing laughter in the audience. Rahul, however, treated Chambars differently, 'The Chambars of Maharashtra have to be gathered in one place and bombed to death. How come you do not have *akkal* [brains]. The daughter of a Chamar [referring to Mayawati] is going to be the prime minister of India'. As laughter prevailed Rahul went on to sing a song in praise of Ravidas and his anti-caste philosophy.

A direct link of caste and power was, thus, forged between the Chamars of UP and the Chambars of Maharashtra and the need for the Chambars of Maharashtra to join this movement which would make 'a daughter of a Chamar' the prime minister of India. A general quote from Ravidas that is cited by the BSP cadre is:

*Aisa Chahu Raaj Main, Jahan Sabhan Ko Mile Ann* [I want the kind of rule where everyone gets food]

*Chot Bado Sab Samm Base, Ravidas Rah Prasann* [where the big and the small live equally, Ravidas will then be happy]

The BSP cadres argue that the kind of rule that Ravidas aspired for can be provided only by BSP. This quote from Ravidas, however, seemed most handy while convincing the Charmakars in favour of BSP. Also, the blue colour (of BSP) is generally associated with Mahar Ambedkarites. On 31 January 2009, a district-level Charmakar *samaj* meeting was organised in Beed as part of the BSP's mobilisation of Charmakars. BSP's Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha Mr X was to address this meeting. Dr C, a lecturer at a college in Nagpur University from Charmakar caste and some non-Dalits, joined him. Around a thousand Charmakars both men and women from across Beed attended this gathering. Charmakar (not Chambar) pride was again evoked by the organisers who introduced the *khasdar* (local term for MP) as a Charmakar. The MP spoke in Hindi and combined Charmakar pride with BSP's quest for taking revenge for the humiliation that Congress had put Babasaheb through. While there was not as good a response for the suggested avenging of Ambedkar's



humiliation, Charmakar pride did evoke a good applause from the participants.

While in Maharashtra the Charmakars may be less numerically but in the whole country amongst the SCs the Charmakars constitute 90 per cent [ ... ] In UP, out of the total SCs, the Charmakars are 95 per cent [some applause here...] and every one considers Mayawati as their leader [ ... ] Congress and BJP divide the voting of SCs so that an SC should not become the prime minster [ ... ] The Charmakars across the country are supporting Mayawati [ ... ] Why should you support BSP? Because Mayawati is a Charmakar, I am a Charmakar and you are Charmakars too [applause here]. If we have to make Behenji Pradhan Mantri then we all will have to vote for BSP. (Speech recorded: 31 January 2009)

The Charmakar rejection of Dalit parties including BSP in Maharashtra is also linked to the excessive representation of Charmakar leaders in both BJP-SS and Congress.

Further on, I present two cases that elaborate the complex process of rendering caste visible and help in building Bahujan ideology and identity. K (forty-four) is an assistant lecturer in one of the junior colleges in Beed run by a powerful Teli from NCP. K has travelled from NCP to BJP and had joined BSP covertly (he called it *aatun*) during my fieldwork. K had switched from NCP to BJP as he was refused a ticket from NCP for contesting Zilla Parishad elections. K and his wife were present for the Charmakar meeting of BSP but he did not come on the stage, unlike others who lined up to shake hands with the MP. He also showed me the receipt of the ₹500 that he had contributed when contributions were being collected on the occasion of Mayawati's birthday. It is not just K's support for BSP that is covert but also is his Ambedkarite leaning.

The living room at K's flat in Beed had two beds. One of these beds had a small shelf attached to it. K [after knowing thoroughly about my research] removed some literature from that closed shelf which contained some books in Marathi on the Ambedkarite movement and Charmakars. These were, however, closed in the shelf; no one could see them unless one opened the shelf. The living room had no pictures that one would generally find in the houses of a Mahar or Mang activist such as that of Ambedkar Buddha or even Ravidas. It had one small silver idol of goddess Lakshmi. (Field notes: 24 February 2009)

As opposed to K, Banage, another Charmakar in Majalgaon, was more vocal in displaying his Ambedkarite identity and leanings. Chanderlal

Banage (thirty-three) is seventh class pass and owns a small roadside cobbler stall in Majalgaon. During my fieldwork his shack was a site for regular discussions among the workers of BSP. One of the most noticeable aspects of Banage was his interest in reading and accumulating reading material related to BSP. He had collected clippings from newspapers and magazines in his stall which he would share during conversations. Besides Dalits, he would engage with OBCs, Muslim and some Marathas. He and other committed cadres of BSP would regularly try to convince more members to join BSP. Banage was previously a supporter of CPI (M) and BBM before joining as a full-time BSP worker.

Banage informed me about a particular incident of discrimination that had influenced his political choices and proximity to Dalit movements as compared to other Charmakars who kept a distance from RPI formations. Banage was the *sachiv* [secretary] of a Muslim *bhaichara* and also the taluka president of Akhil Bhartiya Guru Ravidas Samata Parishad (ABGRSP), a social organisation that mobilises Charmakars towards Ravidas and BSP. Banage actively purges Ravidas from Hindu leanings, he even considered the term Rohidas that is prevalent locally to be a *Manuwadi* plot. Banage was pursued to attend the cadre trainings by local BAMCEF workers who had also impressed upon him that Kanshiram and Mayawati were from Charmakar caste. Banage has been attending the cadre trainings since 1997. However, it is only since 2007 that he became a full-time cadre involved in mobilising resources and people in favour of BSP. Following the '85–15 formula', Banage maintains that BSP strives to make this vertical *manuwadi* system (of caste hierarchy) horizontal. Banage held that a lack of 'awareness' amongst the Charmakars was responsible for their miserable presence in BSP.

This system [*manuwad*] has been fitted in our heads. You worship gods, various gods and then you worship the godmen [maharaj] and then you give them *daan dakshina* [religious gifts] and feel that problems can be solved by these godmen. People have become dependent on god and godmen. Everyone goes through good and bad times but they [Charmakars] think that god will solve all their problems [ ... ] My brother used to say that this party has this *samaj* [Mahar] and we should not contribute money. I told them, you pay money for temple, god, why not for party and social work? Construction of temple does not change the status of *samaj*. I studied BSP and understood that BSP is not just about Mahars [ ... ] The Brahmans are joining BSP, everyone else is joining, why shouldn't we? This is our home, we have freedom here. (Interview: 23 December 2008)

Banage understood that the *dheya* [objective or mission] of the BSP is to end caste, to create a society without caste, but he underemphasised any need to convert to Buddhism.

[Converting to] Buddhism is not important. It is just a label. What is important is change of *vichar* [ideology]. We all are human beings and we should have *Manavtawadi* [humanist] ideology. There is *Manuwad* and *Manavtawad* [ ... ] we are for *Manavtawad*. This party is for *Manavtawad*. That is important [ ... ] It does not make sense to label it as something [Buddhist]. (Interview: 23 December 2008)

Over time Banage has removed pictures of gods and goddesses from his home. He also considered Kanshiram as a selfless Buddhist monk in every sense. He did not emphasise a Buddhist collective identity in the formation of a Bahujan identity, but retained the Ambedkarite critique of *Manuwad*. This is also because an obsession with forming only one Buddhist identity may push out those who can be mobilised in favour of BSP through other means like caste repertoires. Charmakars are, thus, mobilised by evoking the Bhakti leanings of Ravidas against caste, through mobilising caste pride and forging linkages with the Ambedkarite mission of ending *Manuwad* as conceived by BSP. In this process, the identity of Charmakars is consolidated, rendered visible and linked to the Bahujan identity.

A senior leader of BSP estimated that there are around 200 symbols—modern and medieval—that could be evoked for organising scattered castes into a collective Bahujan identity with an anti-caste ideology. Such politicisation and consolidation of caste is translated into ‘we for ourselves’ in party politics. The imagined Bahujan identity with Ambedkarite ideology is thus merged with fragmented Bhakti and other symbols like Santaji (a Bhakti saint from the Teli caste), Chandragupta Maurya (framed as a king from a shepherd caste), Prasenjit (a Mang king) and various others, so as to merge ambitions of political power with anti-caste ideology.

## OBCs, BSP and Ambedkarism

Congress tells Yadavs, do not follow Babasaheb, you are from the *khandan* [genealogy/lineage] of God Krishna. Babasaheb will make you Chamar, Harijan. So why will Yadavs follow Ambedkar if they are from Krishna’s *khandan* [laughter here]. Why will the one who has a lineage of God

Krishna follow Babasaheb and call oneself backward? (Speech, BAM-CEF cadre training: 28 June 2009)

There are 216 castes identified as OBCs in Maharashtra.<sup>12</sup> Dongre, a senior worker of BSP and a lawyer by profession, held the view that Ambedkar had envisioned a coalition of OBCs and Dalits through Article 340.

Babasaheb made provision of reservation for the OBCs. Babasaheb had the vision of understanding that the Dhobis and Telis will have no work to do in future, even they are *gulam*, and it was through Article 340 that Babasaheb tried to unite SC, ST and OBC. (Field notes: 25 December 2008)

Like the Charmakars, several OBC castes too consider Ambedkar (even Phule and Shahu) as 'untouchable' symbols of assertion. The opposition of Congress and BJP to reservations for OBC during the debates over implementation of Mandal Commission is regularly evoked and historicised by the BSP cadre to remind the OBCs of Congress-BJP betrayal (or *Manuwad*) and the role of BSP in implementing the Mandal Commission. Some from castes identified as OBCs, within and outside BSP, hold similar views and are critical of major political formations. This does not, however, translate into unity in party politics between the constitutional groupings like those of OBCs. Some visible passionate 'non-political' mobilisation of the OBC category during my fieldwork was against the demand of reservation of Marathas as the OBCs feared that Marathas will be included in the OBC category. Two major OBC leaders in Maharashtra, Gopinath Munde and Chagan Bhujbal, had both opposed this move from their respective positions in Congress and BJP. In Beed, the Vanjaris constitute a dominant OBC caste and some Vanjaris have been associated with BSP in the past. On knowing that I was researching on BSP, Dadasaheb Munde (from Vanjari caste) who is employed in the education department spared no time in telling me that he was actively engaged in BSP in his college days.

He gave another interesting paraphrase on caste, '*Kele Ke Jad Mein Pat Mein Pat Aur Hindu Dharma*'<sup>13</sup> *Ke Jat Mein Jat Mein Jat*' [Like the layers of leaves within the root of a banana tree are the layers of caste within

<sup>12</sup>Available at National Commission for Backward Classes' website, <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/backward-classes/maharashtra.html> (accessed on 10 July 2010).

<sup>13</sup>Dharma was generally used as a synonym for religion amongst the activists. Hindu dharma meant Hindu religion.

caste in Hindu religion.] Munde told me that he got to know Charvak [an ancient Indian philosophy closer to Buddhist principles] and Periyar after joining BSP. We were at the *dhaba* [bar] where he was having both fish and whisky unlike his senior Vanjari colleague who was not eating fish as it was a *shravan* month [a holy month for Hindus]. When I asked Dadasaheb why he was not avoiding meat as most Hindus prefer to do in *shravan*, he replied, ‘I hope no one will feel bad here. I have had mutton with *mal*<sup>14</sup> on me [ ... ] I don’t believe in such things [ ... ] India will become communist if all communists became Buddhist’. (Field notes: 22 August 2008)

Dadasaheb’s analysis of caste was still influenced by the cadre trainings of BSP. Like Ambedkarite Dalits he saw caste as a disease that affects the public spirit of all Hindus. He, therefore, suggested that the communists should become Buddhists (i.e., give away Hinduism and caste) to make India communist. It is interesting to note, however, that Dadasaheb is no longer a supporter of BSP but supports the BJP. The recognition, representation and domination of Vanjaris (Gopinath Munde) in BJP are key factors that attract Vanjaris towards BJP. Thus, BJP too uses the ‘Bahujan’ rhetoric locally to mobilise votes in its favour. The Bahujan-ism of BJP or Congress is, however, not considered as ‘Ambedkarite’ by the cadre of BSP.

Some OBC members of BSP emphasised Phule-Ambedkarite ideology in BSP and stayed in BSP much longer than several Dalits. Dr Bhubade (seventy) has been with BSP since 1991. Bhubade is from the Mali caste and he emphasised that the elite within the Mali community betrayed the ideology of Phule. Bhubade is also the district head of *Satyashodhak Samaj*, which he felt was a defunct organisation.

Bhubade does not have any following within the Malis mostly due to his anti-Hindu tirade; he is particularly against idol worship and any ritual practice (marriage or death) that involves calling a Brahman as a priest. Bhubade owns 22 acres of land and is amongst those few well-to-do BSP cadres who continue to spend from their pockets for party meetings and gatherings. Despite the disappointing performance of BSP in the Maharashtra elections of 2009, Bhubade travelled to Lucknow in March 2010. He and some other cadres of the party participated in the national rally of BSP held on 15 March to celebrate 25 years’ of the formation of BSP.

<sup>14</sup>A necklace made of tulsi beads worn by Hindu followers of God Vitthal from Pandharpur which requires being strict vegetarian and non-alcoholic.

Bhobade has a past in CPI but has switched from Left politics to BSP. For him, challenging the cultural elements of *manuwad* was more important than mere talk on class issues.

I grew up in the Left environment since schooling. They are not against *manuwad* and *vishamtamay samaj vyavashta* [unequal social system]. The communists speak a radical language but do not bring it in practice. That is why I moved to *Satyashodhak Samaj* and then to BSP and now I am a Buddhist. [ ... ] Every communist organises his or her marriage through *manuwad* by inviting the Brahmans and does all the god business. [ ... ] The objective of this party is implementing *Phule-Ambedkarwadi vichar* [ideology]. Those who are not here because of the ideology leave the party. In *samatawadi vichar* [ideology of equality], there is no *bhat-brahman*—no *puja archana* [praying rituals] in this party. We have to make *samajik samata* [social equality]. We do not accept the unequal system. (Interview: 11 December 2008)

Bhobade's shift from class to caste ideology is intriguing and helps us understand the decline of CPI (later CPI-M). Beed had a strong presence of CPI including elected MPs and MLAs till the late-1970s, which reduced significantly with the growth of the Congress followed by the BJP and SS. The failure of CPI to bring in changes in the lives of the poor due to the dominance of Congress in the centre and the state led to the CPI losing its support base to the caste-based patronage politics of Congress and later BJP-SHS. CPI's decline, however, can also be attributed to its inability to integrate caste-based inequalities and cultural practices surrounding caste into its class-based ideology.

Bhobade, who was amongst the committed workers of CPI, was attracted to BSP after BAMCEF workers provided him with readings on Phule, insisting that he should read Phule as he is from the Mali caste. Bhobade later moved on to read Ambedkar and was so influenced that he recently decided to convert to Buddhism.

While ideological bindings do not always work in favour of strengthening BSP, the cadres also try to broad-base BSP's support by involving the poor amongst OBCs in contesting elections and thus attracting them towards BSP and Ambedkarism. In Massajog village, the Marathas constitute 60 per cent, the Mahars 20 per cent, Mangs and Chambars around 5 per cent each and other OBC castes constitute 10 per cent. There are three elected representatives from BSP in the *gram panchayat* of which Satish Jadhav is one. Jadhav, in his late thirties, is ninth pass and comes from Koli (fishing) caste. Massajog village has only one Koli household which is that of Jadhav.

Massajog is close to the highway and hosts tea and snack stalls as long distance buses and transport vehicles stop here for short breaks. Jadhav is landless and used to work as a helper in local hotels. He has gradually moved to own a small stall on wheels on the highway where he sells newspaper and snacks in the morning. After being convinced by Sonawane (BSP, taluka president of Kej from Massajog village), Jadhav had contested the last Zilla Parishad elections on a BSP ticket as it was reserved for OBC; he emerged the runner-up and polled 1,465 votes. Jadhav was threatened by the Marathas (from NCP) to withdraw his candidature twice as they had hosted another OBC. However, the local BSP workers rushed for immediate support (termed as security by BSP workers). After losing the ZP elections, Jadhav contested for the *gram panchayat* elections of Massajog on the seat reserved for OBC, which he won with Dalit support.

Jadhav now also looks after a beer shop owned by a Maratha (who is not too comfortable dealing with drunkards). Jadhav's earnings have not increased much as his income hovers around ₹3,000 per month, but contesting elections has secured him a respectable (*aadar*) position in the village, something that was not the case earlier. Earlier, people used to call him Satya (instead of Satish), *Kolgandya* (a derogatory term for Koli caste-members). It changed to Satish, later to Jadhav and now most call him Jadhav Saheb. Like any BSP cadre, Jadhav too considers BSP as 'his own' party and he calls those affiliated to Congress or BJP their slaves. He too felt that winning elections for BSP was not easy but emphasised that increasing vote percentage was important. Jadhav was not troubled by the fact that this was a party dominated by Dalits or Ambedkarite ideology.

R [a Mahar supporter of BSP] entered the beer shop and greeted Jadhav with Ram Ram.<sup>15</sup> Jadhav responded by greeting him with *Jai Bhim* and questioned him, what is Ram Ram? R responded curtly, '*Ram Ram Madhe Mai Ghalta Mag Kashala Jai Bhim Ghalta* [you lay your mother in Ram Ram, then why say *Jai Bhim*?] You have all your marriages in Hindu rituals and then talk of *Jai Bhim*.' Jadhav smiled and said that things will change slowly [*halu halu*]. (Field notes: 22 May 2009)

The Dalit workers of BSP indulge in discussing the 'ills' of Hindu religion, which Jadhav too has grown sympathetic to. Jadhav is not amongst those who spend a little time reading literature. But he seemed convinced with the persuasions of BSP cadres who emphasise the similarities in the issues facing Dalits and OBCs, the need for a Bahujan

<sup>15</sup>This may be because of my presence here, as R knew that I was researching on Dalit politics.

collective to secure political power for bringing change. Jadhav and his wife are known for their contribution in mobilising support for BSP in Massajog. I asked Jadhav why he would continue to support BSP when it had not gained a single seat in the general elections of 2009 in Maharashtra.

J: Today or tomorrow you will see success, wait and see in Vidhan Sabha elections. I have learnt a lot from this party. Our people vote just for liquor and they rule.

S: Who are our people?

J: Mang, Muslim, Harijan, Dhangar, Koli.

S: And who are they?

J: The Marathas. We all have to unite and then we will be able to rule.

(Field notes: 22 May 2009)

For Jadhav, securing of political power in the local *gram panchayat* has translated into an improved social status where people—including his relatives—respect him now. This has also brought him closer to the Buddhist Ambedkarites of BSP and their Ambedkarism. The Bahujan identity as understood by Jadhav is one comprising those communities who do not have power and it included the Muslims who are generally constructed as anti-nationalist in Hindutva discourses. I will now deal with how the BSP cadres attempt to mobilise Muslims.

## Muslims in the Bahujan Identity

The mainstream public sphere in the months of November and December 2008 in Maharashtra was jammed with nationalist pride and emotions following the attack by 'Pakistani terrorists' and the martyrdom of Indian soldiers in south Mumbai. There was also news speculation on the possibility of war between India and Pakistan following the attack on Taj Hotel in Mumbai in November. Banage, who was then the Muslim *bhaichara* sachiv, was concerned over these developments. He asked me if there will be a war between India and Pakistan. I said I doubted such a possibility. However, Banage had more to add. He asked me, 'Do China and Pakistan commit all the atrocities that have happened against Dalits and Muslims in India? Answering himself in the negative he added that there is no need for war with China or Pakistan (Field notes: 23 December 2008).



Banage was referring to the ‘violence within’ against Dalits and Muslims. Banage would highlight the plight of Muslims from partition to Gujarat. The cadre and the leaders hardly emphasise the threat of China and Pakistan in their speeches. In Hindutva discourses, as well as in some other mainstream party discourses, Muslim loyalty is always in doubt when it comes to nationalism and commitment to the nation. The history of Muslim rule is invoked as a dark past. In the rallies of BSP, there were special efforts to form the Bahujan identity so as to include Muslims.

Shaikh Mohammed, one of the senior leaders of the BSP in Marathwada, began his speech at the Janhit Chetana rally with paying ritual tribute to Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar and Kanshiram. He also added the names of others such as Ahilyabai Holkar, Birsa Munda, Santai with Maulana Fais-ul-Haq, Maulana Johar and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

My *Salam*, *Jai Bhim* and Namaskar to these great people [ ... ] Oh people of Bahujan *samaj*, oh Muslims [ ... ] Bharat is our *watan* [nation], we are the inhabitants of this country, the Dravidians, the adivasis. It was the Aryans who gave birth to the *Manuwadi* system in this country [ ... ] The Bahujan *samaj* is slave, earlier they were slaves to English and now they are slaves to the thieves and dacoits [Congress and BJP]. Who is the Bahujan *samaj*? It is the SC, ST, OBC and Minorities. Of the 108 crore population of India most are Bahujans. If the majority are Bahujans then the government too has to be ours. We have the problem of water, road, poverty and farmer suicide. These problems are not given by Allah but by Congress, who have been ruling all this while. It is the people with evil *vichardhara* [by which he meant *Manuwad*]*—the Congress and BJP.*

Let me remind you, the Muslims sacrificed their lives in the *gadar* [revolution] of 1857. Their names do not even figure in any of the history books [ ... ] It is all Bapu and Mahatma Gandhi [ ... ] That is why the Muslims of UP have supported BSP. (Recorded speech: 22 September 2008)

Shaikh Mohammed ended his speech with ‘*Jai Bhim, Jai Bharat* and *Khuda Hafiz*’. He constructed Muslims also as part of the Bahujan identity. He particularly reminded the audience of the role of Muslims in nation building and the Congress betrayal of Muslims and Muslim history and retained the specificity of Muslims by adding *salaam* and *Khuda Hafiz*. He held Congress responsible for the deprived state of Muslims in the postcolonial period. Muslims are also made to feel proud of (and not sorry for) their glorious past—a ruling community that was (in the words of Shaikh Mohammed) turned into one of rag-pickers in current times.

Along with other BSP cadres Banage had formed a Muslim *bhaichara* in Majalgaon. He convinced some of his Muslim friends to join and Mubarak, in his mid-thirties, was the one amongst them who had become president of this *bhaichara* committee. While the formation of *bhaichara* was a top-down process through orders and ideas from above, the cadres in Majalgaon made it a personal sociopolitical effort. Mubarak had become actively involved in BSP after a communal clash between Wadars (stone-mason caste) and Muslims in Majalgaon. This clash had started after bikes of a Muslim youth and a Wadar youth crashed into each other. An argument grew into fights that led to stone pelting between Muslims and Wadars. Following this, the police at around 2.30 a.m. arrested a Muslim youth who was not involved in the violence. Mubarak opposed this move and questioned the police. The police responded by arresting Mubarak as well for his act. Mubarak's brother had called Banage and informed him about this. Banage and Dr Bhobade had rushed to the police station the next morning to secure bail for Mubarak. Mubarak's family had been against Mubarak joining the BSP but have actively supported him after this incident. Mubarak described the distinction between BSP and other Dalit parties in the following terms: 'educated *bamans* (Brahmans) join RSS, our educated people join *jamat* and the educated amongst you join BSP' (Field notes: 23 December 2008).

As part of the mobilisation of Muslim opinion in favour of BSP, a Muslim *bhaichara* rally was organised in Majalgaon on 19 December 2008. In one of the planning meetings for this event, Siddharth (District in-charge) suggested that Mubarak should do home visits and invite educated people like doctors, engineers and Maulanas for the meeting. Mubarak asked Siddharth if they could print pictures of some Muslim *maharpurushs* along with Phule Shahu and Ambedkar such as Tipu Sultan. Siddharth responded:

Shahu, Phule and Ambedkar were involved in social reforms such as education, reservation and Constitution but Tipu Sultan was not. He added that Marathas continue to insist on respecting Shivaji<sup>16</sup> more than Shahu

<sup>16</sup>Shivaji is also evoked at times as a Bahujan king. Cadres in informal conversations pointed out that it was more strategic than ideological as Marathas find Shivaji's martial valour to be more important. While there were some Marathas in BSP who had joined, anticipating growth and success of BSP in post 2007 scenario, cadres also maintained that it was most difficult to get Marathas into the party and efforts were made especially to mobilise the poor Marathas against the rich.

but Shahu remains important for us. Putting Mohammed Paigambar's picture [i.e., prophet Mohammed] would have been ideal as his thoughts were *samata mulak* [principles of equality] but we do not have his picture. (Field notes: 11 December 2008)

Siddharth suggested that Mubarak should instead print his own picture on the pamphlet as organiser and give a speech in the Muslim *bhaichara* meeting. Pamphlets were printed with pictures of Ambedkar, Shahu, Phule and Kanshiram along with the symbol of elephant. On the top of these symbols was a quote of Kanshiram in Hindi—*Jis Samaj Ka Shashan Hota, Uska Shoshan Nahi Hota* [the community which has political power is not exploited]. Along with a life size picture of Mayawati and Maulana Firoz Ali (a senior Muslim leader of BSP in Marathwada from Jalana) and a picture of Mubarak was printed below. Contributions were raised for this meeting from some Dalits (BAMCEF), OBCs and Muslims.

This was a low-budget gathering with no *pandal*, just a small stage on the market roadside and mat for people to sit on the ground. Some BSP workers raised slogans like *BSP Ke Teen Kaptan* [Three Captains of BSP], *Dalit*, *OBC*, *Musalman*. Mubarak made his maiden speech here where he spoke on the benefits Muslims had derived out of BSP rule in UP and added that, 'all parties have fooled us; we are threatened if we do not vote for Congress that there will be riots. Therefore, the need for Muslims to vote for BSP and make Mayawati the prime minister' (Recorded speech: 19 December 2008). Mubarak's friends, Dalits and Muslims clapped here. Other Dalit and OBC speakers would end their speeches with *Jai Bhim* and *Khuda Hafiz*. The key speaker was Maulana Firoz Ali who opened his speech with some lines in Arabic and ritual salutations to Bahujan leaders. He repeated Ambedkar's role in securing universal adult franchise for Bahujans as against wishes of Gandhi who wanted the voting rights for those with education and property. Ali questioned how many graduates are there amongst the Shia, Sunni, Dhangar, Lohar or Kumbhar even after 60 years of independence?

Ali attributed the deprived status of these communities to Congress's misrule. He simultaneously constructed a Bahujan collective based on recognition of 'difference' between these ethnic identities and the similarity they faced in their deprivation. He explained to the Muslim listeners how they voted under compulsion for Congress and they feared that not voting for Congress would mean coming of BJP-SS to power vis-à-vis riots. He gave the example of UP where Congress and BJP were both

pushed to the margins by BSP growth and claimed that this could be replicated in Maharashtra.

If you ask a Muslim during elections where they are planning to vote, they in turn ask which way the wind is blowing. Do not allow the wind to decide your future. There is an old saying, 'Allah or god never helps those who are not concerned about helping themselves'. You have to come forward to change your situation. (Recorded speech: 19 December, 2008)

The support extended by Muslim League for Ambedkar's seat in the Constituent Assembly and Ambedkar's role in instituting Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB) vis-à-vis religious freedom for Muslims were also cited in cadre trainings (Recorded speech: 7 December 2008), evoking the history of Dalit-Muslim alliances. In an informal conversation after the rally, Maulana, an old timer in BSP, shared with me how he was attracted to Kanshiram's selfless politics and added that BSP's Phule-Ambedkarite ideology was close to the basic fundamentals of Islam like that of equality written in *hadith* (Interview: 19 December 2008). Maulana's quest, however, was not for mere representation of Muslims in Parliament or in the Legislative Assembly. In his speech he gave examples of various measures in UP such as scholarships for school-going Muslim children, aid for Madrasas and the establishment of an Arabic University. Later in an informal conversation, he informed me about how mere Muslim representation in Congress without ideology goes against Muslim interests. Maulana Firoz Ali is also part of a local NGO group in Marathwada called Muslim Vikas Manch (Development Forum); he shared an instance of organising a protest demanding scholarships for poor Muslim children going to schools. The concerned minister called Maulana for a meeting and asked him what more they needed as there was already a Muslim MLA from the region. Maulana requested the minister to remove the MLA and give scholarships to poor Muslim children instead. Maulana also ridiculed the word 'minority' for Muslims and emphasised that it was only Dalits and Muslims who could mobilise support outside any state unlike Sharad Pawar (a Maratha leader) who had no support outside Maharashtra.

Besides unmasking Congress as an upper caste party and its SC candidates as stooges, BSP extracts a negative vote for itself through narratives of humiliation, observes Chandra (2000). She also suggests that the new type of ethnic politics of BSP offers an effective check on the escalation of social conflict and in renegotiation of power relations than

the dominance of the Congress party. Chandra (2000), however, under-emphasises the ideological dimensions of BSP's mobilisation. 'Ideology dignifies discontent, identifies a target for grievances and forms an umbrella over the discrete grievances of overlapping groups' (David Apter cited in Heller 2000: 506). The politics of BSP locates caste (and therefore religion) and not region or language at the centre of its ideology and mobilisation strategies, the other is *Manuwad* an abstract formulation against which all castes can be mobilised including the Brahmans, thus, retaining an Ambedkarite agenda at the core.

What does BSP's politics mean to the substantialisation processes of caste? From the aforementioned we observe that BSP aids substantialisation of caste and not annihilation; however its politics forges trust across castes and communities. Castes are not left hanging and disconnected discrete social groups and a politics of tolerating difference and challenging hierarchy is followed. BSP's politics problematises the idea of 'Hindu majority' by locating caste at the centre, no caste constitutes a majority. Bahujan is, thus, mobilised as an alliance between varied castes and communities on the basis of deprived status and through cultural repertoires by mobilising community pride and linking it to anti-caste histories.

## **Making of Bahujan from Below and Unsettling of Caste Order**

This chapter has elaborated the non-political and ideological groundings of party-political mobilisation in BSP. The caste and cultural repertoires of BSP point to a continuum of democratic politics in Dalit movements. The substantialisation of caste through BSP includes critical public engagement that transcends mere reproducing caste solidarities. BSP cadres follow Ambedkar to hold caste as the central problematic of Indian (civil) society.

Gupta (1991) has challenged the idea of hierarchy as the all embracing principle behind caste system and points to the existence of different hierarchies and caste ideologies. In some ways, Gupta (1991) fails to take note of dynamic anti-caste ideologies and politics. To follow the dynamism and construction of caste from below, there is a need to theorise the multifarious, heterotemporal ways in which caste writes itself into the body politic of India (Ganguly 2004). The subaltern consciousness,

lower historical moments and the dharma of minor sects challenge ideas of caste as homo hierarchus (Chatterjee 1989).

Competing politics of caste has resulted in multiple forms of caste substantialisation. Ambedkar and Buddha, for instance, have been absorbed into the pantheon of 'Hindu' deities by Mahar worshippers (Ganguly 2004). Caste, bhakti and dharma are however, what political groups make out of them. In the Indian public sphere, 'Bhakti is like an empty vessel into which both nectar and poison can be poured' (Novetzke 2007).

The BSP's politics takes note of the dynamic nature of caste and its potential in reproducing hierarchies and politics of intolerance. It can also be said that its mobilisation strategies, therefore, are not totally synchronised with the absolute alternative of Buddhism that Ambedkar envisaged and they also point toward a proximity to Bhakti traditions. Through evoking anti-caste symbols selectively, BSP adds to the substantialisation processes of caste and not its annihilation. It also confers on every caste the status of political minority, besides reminding them of their anti-caste past or power-holding status, thus attempting to merge these symbolologies and ideologies with 'untouchable' ideologies of protest with Ambedkar at their core. Castes are, thus, strategically purged from their content of hierarchy. All the symbols in this process including the Constitution of India are mobilised towards forming an imagined Ambedkarite political community termed as 'Bahujan' with 'Dalits' at its core. In the practice of alternative political bhakti, the BSP cadres merge the political and cultural. While the old bhakti could mostly think of equality through God, the new imagines one through a merger of modern and traditional anti-caste symbols and through securing political power.

The making of caste visible and simultaneous evoking anti-caste traditions in BSP's politics may be among the necessary processes that could lead to the annihilation of caste intolerance and inequalities. In constituting an alternative public sphere, the BSP cadres have partially succeeded in moving '*Jai Bhim*' and Ambedkarite politics beyond Mahars, not just to Chambaras and Mangs but also to some Shudras.

# 6

## Beyond Mahar Dominance

### The Making of Phule-Ambedkarite Mangs in MHA

Mangs and Mahars had traditional rivalries that revolved around competition for a better share in the local organisation of a caste economy in which Mahars were placed higher in the order than Mangs. Mangs and Mahars, thus, lived in close proximity and permanent animosity, remarks Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 46). Under pre-colonial rulers, ‘the Mangs were public executioners and it was said to be the proudest moment of a Mang’s life when he could perform his office on a Mahar’ (Russell 1916: 241). Such repulsion and animosity in current times is associated with Mahar conversions to Buddhism, their relatively better socio-economic and political status as well as Mahar preponderance in government jobs in the quotas meant for untouchable castes. Mahars have historically dominated the Phule-Ambedkarite movement that challenged caste hierarchies. Thus, the anti-caste identity of Buddhist has become one synonymous locally with Mahar identity.

The Mangs have largely remained at the periphery or outside such mobilisations. Such exclusion of Mangs from Phule-Ambedkarite movement is attributed by Burra (1986) to Ambedkar’s Mahar identity. The Mang participants and activists of MHA, however, claim to be Ambedkarites. This stands in contrast to the general understanding of Mangs as Hindus or as anti-Mahars. Activists and some participants of MHA consider themselves as ‘aware’ and as ones who embrace Ambedkarite identity and ideology consciously as part of their protest against caste inequality and exclusions. Mang participants of MHA’s

mobilisation, however, travel through multiple collective identities in the context of caste competition and politics that pervades the larger political culture.

This chapter engages with the mobilisation and politicisation of Mangs in MHA. In continuation with the previous chapter, it specifically details the paradox of anti-caste ideological mobilisation amongst Mangs that leads to both the politicisation of Mangs and the simultaneous substantialisation of Mang caste. Such substantialisation of Mangs through MHA, however, is not based on anti-Mahar churning. This chapter also charts how jati (caste) as a resource for sociopolitical mobilisation is not an absolute social category and the mobilisation of jati into a political community is a process shaped in the relational contexts of movements and may lead to multiple collective identities and sociopolitical outcomes. This chapter shows how the MHA functions in a multi-organisational field and explores the intersections of caste, class and culture that shape and get shaped by its mobilisation process. These processes are mapped through the participation of Mangs in MHA's mobilisation, their critical public discourses and strategic use of caste.

### **Locating MHA and Its 'Mang' Identity in Mahar-dominated Dalit Politics**

The MHA in Beed is identified with Mang power. In an informal conversation (Field notes: 31 January 2009), a Mahar worker of BSP contested the universal claim in the name MHA and jokingly referred to it as 'Mang' Hakk Abhiyaan (Campaign for Mang Rights). Similarly, a Mahar worker of RDC said, 'Yes, we are seen as people who work for Mangs' (Field notes: 27 January 2009).

Senior workers of MHA emphasise that it is particularly interested in the empowerment of Mangs. Ashok, one of the Mahar workers who has been part of MHA since its inception, explained the ideological reasons: 'One of the important objectives of MHA was to take Ambedkarvad (Ambedkarism) to Mangs. Mahars will simply follow if we take the name of Ambedkar whereas Mangs will not' (Interview: 23 May 2009). Thus, Mahars may become Ambedkarites and the Mangs may oppose Ambedkarism for Ambedkar being a Mahar. Ambedkarism



amongst Mangs, though scant, is not new in Marathwada or Beed. Some of the Mangs who had accessed education at Milind College in Aurangabad during the late 1970s and early 1980s were influenced by Dalit movements and had converted to Buddhism. They had actively participated in the *Namantar* movement and in DP mobilisation. Awad's own involvement in movements that were dominated by Mahars such as the DPs, DS4, BAMCEF and BSP has been described earlier.

Awad and MHA have a strong non-political basis for their politics where Hindu practices that construct the untouchable status of Mangs is criticised. For instance, Awad converted to Buddhism in 2006 to commemorate fifty years' of Ambedkar's conversion with some of his followers, a move that was seen as anti-Mang and anti-Hindu by some Mang social organisations and some of his own followers. However, Awad emphasised that his 2006 conversion was symbolic to attract Mang and other castes towards Buddhism. He said he had been a Buddhist for a long time and gave the example of his thirty-four-year-old son's name, which was Milind (a Buddhist name). Awad is thus known amongst non-Mang Ambedkarite circles and is called to address meetings and conventions on Ambedkarism.

Conversion to Buddhism was amongst the most important strategies of Ambedkar and was aimed at forming an anti-caste collective identity amongst the untouchable castes and other deprived sections. Ambedkarite ideology, thus, partially spread beyond the dominance of Mahars amongst non-Mahars and Mahars too played a role in this. Awad emphasised that even though his father was illiterate, he too had 'knowledge' about Ambedkar. Awad spoke of the closeness that existed between Mahars and Mangs at the village level and his being influenced by Ambedkarism. The MHA had broad based its mobilisation by focusing on Dalits in general, but Mangs as the most deprived and non-politicised remain at the centre of such efforts. Eknath Awad thus discourages mang-isation of the MHA or RDC and has consciously included non-Mangs in its projects. He is particularly known for his aggressive stance in claiming Dalit rights locally through temple entry, campaigns against bonded labour, religious practices such as *karan*, cutting long hair of *potraj* and facilitating cultivations on *gaairan*. Awad saw Ambedkarite ideology as the reason for not emphasising Mang identity in MHA or in his own leadership:

I never wanted to be a Mang leader. Mangs [those opposing him] have called me *maharachi aulad* (son of a Mahar). I started work radically. I did not fool them [Mangs]. I explained Ambedkarism to them. When I

started this work there was no one with me, not even my wife. There is no compromise in *vichar* [ideology]. (Interview: 24 August 2008)

The MHA activists see their strategy as different from some other Mang mobilisations due to its Phule-Ambedkarite emphasis, one which does not ‘fool’ Mangs. The emphasis in such mobilisation is not to essentialise Mang identity as Hindu against Mahars (as Buddhists) but to reiterate the socio-cultural radicalism of Phule and Ambedkar in rejecting caste values and sociocultural practices that denigrate the social status of Mangs. One of the activists clarified the distinction between other particularistic Mang organisations and MHA: ‘They [other movements] do not create a *watawaran* [context] of *sangharsh* [struggle and conflict], whereas we create awareness and *sangharsh*’ (Informal discussion: 27 January 2009). In creating such awareness, opinion is mobilised to facilitate acceptance of Ambedkar and Ambedkarite ideas amongst the Mangs. This is seen as a challenging process. Here is an excerpt from my field notes that elucidates this challenge:

Some workers of MHA and I were at a tea stall in Devdi village for a meeting which was to begin in sometime. Ashok informed Rajesh that Manisha will be soon getting Annabhau Sathe’s photo [*pratima*] for the meeting. Rajesh asked if Babasaheb’s photo was here. Ashok said yes. Rajesh then added, ‘If Baap [father, referring to Ambedkar] is there then it is okay to not have Bhau [brother, referring to Annabhau]’. Radhabai jokingly pulled Rajesh which made everyone laugh, ‘In front of Mangs from Patri [neighbouring taluka] you will not [dare] say this’. (Field notes: 19 January 2008)

Radhabai was referring to the repulsion of Mangs of Patri to Ambedkar due to his caste. Phule-Ambedkarism is generally seen as an ideology associated with Mahars amongst Dalits and everything that symbolises Ambedkar, including the ‘blue’ colour or his ‘framed picture’ at a meeting may be seen in the local context as Mahar dominance.

In the context of Dalits, it is generally argued that ‘the provision of constitutionally guaranteed parliamentary representation and civil service posts for members of the “SCs” contributed to the emergence of collective identity’ (Nagel 1994: 157). On the contrary, in Maharashtra, the state actively engages in consolidation of jatis amongst the SCs. For instance, there are separate development corporations meant for Mangs (Lokshahir Annabhau Sathe Vikas Mahamandal), Mahars (Mahatma Phule Vikas Mahamandal) and Chambhars (Sant Rohidas Maharaj Charmakar Vikas Mahamandal). Mang political mobilisation in current times has

also been a product of anti-Mahar feelings with a call for separate representation for Mangs within the SC quotas. The politicisation of Mangs and formations of new collective identities is also a reaction to Mahar dominance. The Mangs, however, do not form a unified whole and are divided into hierarchically organised subcastes and not all Mang socio-political formations mobilise around anti-Mahar emotions, MHA being one of them.

## Mangs, Their Subcastes and Sociopolitical Contexts

In Beed District, Mangs mostly comprise landless labourers and sugarcane migrant workers. Some still carry out traditional caste occupations (considered polluting) like making ropes, brooms and baskets. They are also village musicians. The nature of their economic (inter)dependence with the dominant castes is changing at the village level. It is only recently that Mangs have started moving out of the traditional occupations of caste in the Marathwada region. They are educationally and economically more deprived than the Mahars and Chambars (Paik 2007). Sociocultural, political and economic exclusions are, thus, still rampant in many villages against the Dalits in general and Mangs in particular. MHA has had a critical role in identifying and challenging cases of *veth begar* and the long sustained socio-economic exploitation of Mangs by the dominant castes.

While the current anti-Mahar mobilisations amongst Mangs and caste-based patronage encouraged by dominant political parties may have led to some substantialisation of Mang caste, Mangs still remained divided on subcaste grounds. Some Mang subcastes such as Mang Garodi, Ruckwuldar or Ghotalia Mangs were identified as criminal tribes during the British rule (Gunthorpe 1882: 95–104). The 1884 Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency notes the hierarchy amongst Mangs:

They (Mangs) are divided into Mangs proper (also referred to as *Assal/real*), Mang Garudis, Pend Mangs, Holar Mangs, Mochi Mangs and Dakalvars. Of these, the first are considered the highest, and their leavings are eaten by Holars and Dakalvars. The Dakalvars say that they are the highest branch of Mangs and that the others profess to despise them to punish the Dakalvars because they refused to touch the other Mangs. This story seems unlikely as Dakalvars eat the leavings of Mangs and Nade Mangs

and no Mang will touch them. They are not allowed to drink water from a well or stream used by Mangs. (Bombay 1884: 171)

There are supposed to be twelve endogamous subcastes within the Mangs. However, the *assal* Mangs constitute a dominant majority within Mangs and are ranked higher than other castes within Mangs. During my fieldwork, Mang workers of MHA acknowledged the differences within the Mangs which they said ‘came up’ while finalising marriages. They could, however, only think of five subcastes and not all amongst the younger generation were aware of the subcastes.

Mahadev another elderly Mang explained again there are only three *pot jats*: Holar, Mang Garudi and Mang. Sudhamati asked him, ‘What about Telang and Khakrya [subcastes considered low]? Mahadev strongly disagreed and said ‘*Hya* [meant no, to refute Khakrya and Telang as Mang subcastes].’ (Group discussion: 10 December 2008)

Mahadev said *hya* implying ‘no’ with discomfort at the mention of Khakrya and Telang as part of Mangs. When I asked the caste of all the participants in the discussion on their subcastes, there was an interesting response:

S: Are all sitting here *sreshtha* [highest]?

K: Yes, we can say that.

H: Yes, no one from lower subcaste here.

N: Even if someone is why should we say that we are this? [Laughter].

K (asks N): Who is it?

N: No one [laughs]. (Group discussion: 10 December 2008)

Being a lower subcaste within Mangs, thus, can be an embarrassment and may require one to hide one’s caste while interacting with fellow Mangs. This is similar to Mangs or Mahars hiding their ‘inferior’ caste while interacting with castes higher to them in an anonymous context and resorting to sanskritised identities.

The shift to more modern or ‘substantialised’ experiences of caste, however, is not complete. Both variants often coexist and overlap in everyday life and thought (Bayly 1999: 310). While there are differences of subcastes there is also major competition amongst Mang social and political leaders to claim sole leadership of Mangs. Mangs as a jati, thus, cease to be a homogeneous whole in terms of identity, interest or ideology and an axis of mobilisation, therefore, is constructed locally in the praxis of MHA.

## The Construction of 'Gulam' (slave) Mangs

I have discussed the subcastes and competing political currents within the Mangs which partially explain the internal complexities of the construction of Mang identity. Identity, however, needs to be understood as internal-external dialectic of identification (Jenkins 1996: 171). There is thus another image of Mangs as 'docile' that circulates in Phule-Ambedkarite movements. This is also referred to as *gulam/i* (slave/ry). One of the Mahar activists from another social movement commented,

Mahars do not compromise [ ... ] Mangs compromise [ ... ] The Mahars are militant as a rule whereas it is difficult to find such Mangs. The Mahars too are poor even then they are strong. Mahars left traditional polluting occupations [following call of Ambedkar], Mangs were happy; they thought everything [caste occupations] now belongs to them. (Field notes: 8 April 2009)

Mang leaders had historically opposed temple entry efforts for untouchables initiated by Ambedkar and had sided with Brahmins; similar was their opposition to the idea of conversions to Buddhism (Paik 2007: 173–187). Mangs are, thus, considered docile for not radically revolting against traditional inequalities of caste, not converting to Buddhism, not following Ambedkar's call for education and not giving up traditional polluting occupations of caste.

Some Mang workers of MHA too had similar views on the apathy of Mangs to Ambedkarism which they felt was apathy to change. Suvarna and Meena, women workers of MHA on varying occasions felt that 'Mangs are *darindar* [in a culture of poverty] as they do not like to say *Jai Bhim* and are more interested in goddess *Mari-aai*'. A competing category is, thus, created of radical Mangs who are 'aware' and of *darindar/gulam* Mangs who are not aware, therefore backward. In another conversation, Awad jokingly referred to Mangs as *thanda raktache prani* [not hot-blooded] while responding to a Mahar friend's comment on a scheduled MHA-organised Mang meeting as 'revolutionary'.<sup>1</sup>

In a context of competing Mang and other Dalit mobilisations, MHA focuses not only on constructing a collective political identity for Mangs with Ambedkarite leanings, from a movement point of view it also

<sup>1</sup>Mang workers of MHA are, however, not just critical of Mangs, they also critique Mahars who they feel are more Mahars and less Buddhists (anti-caste).

describes who 'is' (and 'is not') a present Mang. Jaffrelet (2000) suggests that ethnicisation of caste in southern and western India (as against sanskritisation in north India) provided alternative non-hierarchical social *imaginaries*. The process of ethnicisation of caste involves acknowledging and asserting caste in a non-hierarchical fashion in anti-caste politics. This is specifically true in the case of untouchable castes so as to purge their castes from 'untouchable' status.

In contrast to the *gulam* Mang identity, the MHA constructs a counter identity of *swabhimani* (self-respecting) Mangs in its mobilisation process. Taking Ambedkar and his ideology beyond Mahars involves use of public discourses in multiple sites and forms. Such discourses encompass both public and private realms and constitute an important part of influencing public opinion of Mangs in favour of Ambedkarism. Such deliberations or discourses take place at various sites, ranging from family conversations to public meetings. It also involves the use of movement literature, CDs and movement songs performed by activists and local artists.

### **Against Gulami and Caste: The Making of *Swabhimani* Mangs**

The MHA has actively mobilised Mangs in favour of *gaairan* encroachment, a struggle that was dominated by Mahars amongst Dalits in the initial phase. Mobilisation of Mangs in MHA is, thus, not purely symbolic or cultural but has a material basis. Besides encroachment of *gaairan*, Mangs were also mobilised against bonded labour practices till mid-1990s and for temple entry. Encroachment of *gaairan*, refusal to carry out traditional occupations and insistence to enter the temple brought the Mangs in villages where MHA was active into conflict with the local dominant castes—mostly Marathas and Vanjaris. The activists of MHA also help the Mangs from such villages to gain access to government schemes and provisions (at times for a fee). The workers of MHA, particularly, intervene when there are cases of caste violence against the Mangs.

These are routine practices of the MHA which strengthen Mang affiliation and build a relationship of trust. Most of the politicisation of Mang identity and performance takes place through discourses in public meetings held during *jayantis* or protest events. Annabhau Sathe *jayanti*

is particularly a site for Mang mobilisation as Annabhau belonged to the Mang caste and is seen as a symbol of Mang pride and assertion along with others such as Lahuji Salave and Mukta Salave.<sup>2</sup> Annabhau Sathe and Lahuji Salave are symbols of Mang assertion and identity, which have consolidated in the last twenty years. Organisations have been formed around these symbols to consolidate Mang identity. Dominant political parties such as Congress and BJP-SS use these symbols for attracting 'Mangs' as a whole. Annabhau and Lahuji, thus, have varied interpretations for mobilisation purposes. While BJP-SS focus more on Lahuji's physical strength and Hindu leanings, the movements with anti-caste leanings focus on his association with Phule and his role in recruiting Mang-Mahar children to school. The making of *swabhimani* Mangs, thus, involves mobilising Mangs to be united for challenging the daily hierarchies and oppression of caste that they may be facing, particularly the dominance of Marathas and Vanjaris. In the *jayanti* discourses of MHA there is no nostalgia for the past. The golden era in one sense begins with Phule followed by Ambedkar and Shahu. Mang historicity amongst MHA activists largely rests with Lahuji Salave, Annabhau, Mukta Salave and their closeness to Phule-Ambedkarite ideologies. These narratives, thus, engage in producing new myths and beliefs about caste and caste status amongst Mangs.

*Jayanti* meetings/functions are not always particular caste gatherings and in a village context while Dalits dominate, non-Dalits too may attend.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Mangs attending such meetings may not be Ambedkarites, may not know about Annabhau and may be not be daring to challenge the practice of untouchability that they face. Thus, the Mang participant may carry varied values which do not fit into the *swabhimani* Mang identity and Ambedkarite ideology that MHA activists seek to construct.

The MHA has encouraged Mangs in various villages to organise Annabhau *jayanti* and MHA activists are called to address these gatherings.

<sup>2</sup>Muktabai Salve was a Mang girl who studied in Phule's class of 1852 (Paik 2007: 52). Some of her critical short essays are circulated in movement circles such as the one titled, *Oh God, What Is the Religion of Us Mangs and Mahars*, which was published by BAMCEF.

<sup>3</sup>Schudson (1997) criticises elitist approaches that emphasise conversations of a particular kind ('civil') in the making of democracy. He argues for heterogeneous conversations as they are 'truly public' and raise the possibility of 'uncomfortable' talk vis-à-vis the aspiration to public reasonableness. The heterogeneous nature and uncomfortable talks on caste in *jayanti* celebrations are also sites of conflict and violence.

It is the Mangs who mostly take the initiative for organising Annabhau *jayanti*. *Jayanti* gatherings in the village include procession of Annabhau's life size photograph in the village with a lot of pomp which includes music, dance (mostly Dalit men) and sloganeering with throwing of *gulal* in the air.<sup>4</sup> This may be followed with speeches (on microphone with speakers) and evening dinner. I also came across Mahar youths in some villages participating in these *jayanti* meetings actively, thus making Annabhau not just a Mang symbol but a symbol of the wider Phule-Ambedkarite movement.

### ***Annabhau Jayanti and Mang Assertion in Asardoha***

The pamphlet printed for *jayanti* in Asardoha village had pictures of Ambedkar, Shahu and Phule starting from the top left and a picture double the size at the left corner of Annabhau. Written below in a bold large font was '*Satyashodhak*<sup>5</sup> Annabhau Sathe's 88 Public *Jayanti* Celebrations, Asardoha Village'. It continued, 'hunger for food takes care of your stomach but the hunger for knowledge makes a revolution happen. Such direction was given by Annabhau so that the *samaj* [generally used to refer to caste] could follow the path of Dr Ambedkar'.

This was the first Annabhau *jayanti* organised in Asardoha by Bhagwan Patole from the Mang caste. He was then elected sarpanch on an 'unreserved' seat. Few months before the *jayanti*, he was attacked by the Deshmukh Marathas (members of an elite caste within the Marathas), with sticks, resulting in severe head injuries. This had to do with Bhagwan changing the political history of this village. Historically, it was the Marathas who 'selected' the sarpanch *bin virodh* (without opposition). Bhagwan changed this by organising and fielding an independent panel of candidates. He himself contested on an unreserved seat. This village does not have the general dominance of numbers that Marathas usually enjoy at the village level in Marathwada. The Hatkars (around 300 households) and the Lamans (around 300 households) are two dominant groups in terms of numbers whereas Mahars (60 households), Mangs (30 households) and Marathas (70 households) are in a minority. The

<sup>4</sup>In some cases, *jayantis* become another venue for Dalit men to get drunk and dance. This is severely criticised by activists who give speeches during *jayantis*.

<sup>5</sup>This was to portray Annabhau as a follower of Phule's *Satyashodhak* (truth-seeking) philosophy that was anti-brahmin/nic in nature.



Marathas are, however, landed gentry and have traditionally been the political heads of this village, until recently deciding who the sarpanch would be. Bhagwan managed to mobilise support from Hatkars and Mahars whereas most of the Mangs and Deshmukhs and the Lamans did not support him. Bhagwan did not have any affiliation with MHA before being attacked by Marathas. He was in fact termed non-cooperative by some workers of MHA who had approached him for some NGO interventions of RDC. MHA had, however, rushed to his support after he was thrashed by the Marathas. Bhagwan had earlier worked in the Dalit wing of NCP and had underemphasised his Mang identity. Bhagwan now is part of MHA, but he also retains his membership of BJP which he joined, he says, to escape the discrimination he faced in NCP due to Maratha dominance.

The Annabhau *jayanti* was organised by Bhagwan in the hope that the Mangs will become 'aware' (*jagruk*) after listening to Awad. He felt that Mangs had not supported him in the panchayat elections under Maratha pressure whereas the Mahars did. Bhagwan explained the docile behaviour of Mangs who are neither united politically nor proud of their Mang identity:

*'Jati Ne Kela Tar Sava Rupaiya Dand Parjati Ne Kela Tar Aatma Thand* [if someone from within the caste fucks them (Mangs) then that person is fined ₹1.25 and if someone from other caste does it then their (Mangs) soul is at peace], this is the case of Mangs.' I did not agree with him and enquired further, 'Well this is not the sole reason and there may be other compulsions'. Patole replied, 'No compulsions, the Mangs were sure that I will get defeated and they did not want to antagonise the Deshmukhs for a Mang who was bound to be defeated'. I asked him if the Mahars supported him, he replied 'Yes, 75 per cent did, they are under the influence of Ambedkar ideology and wanted me to win'. (Field notes: 30 September 2008)

For Bhagwan, the Mangs were docile in their approach and preferred to be 'ruled' and 'raped' by the upper castes and not by the Mangs. This was not the case with Mahars who despite their poor status took the risk of voting for Bhagwan. Bhagwan's proximity to Mahars here could also be seen in the celebration of *jayanti* in Asardoha. Loud fire crackers and some workers whose head were smeared in blue powder marked Awad's entry in the village. Around 200 people were present to listen to the speeches. Most participants were men though there were around ten women from the Mang caste. One of the most important features

of *jayanti* in Aasardoha was of *nila* (blue associated with Ambedkar) instead of *gulal* (Field notes: 24 August 2008). The traditional *gulal* (red powder) used in some Hindu religious gatherings is also used in Annabhau Sathe *jayanti*. *Nila* (blue powder) is a symbol of Ambedkarites (generally associated with Mahars and with conversion to Buddhism) and is viewed as reactionary by *savarnas*.

While the *adhyaksha* [president] of the *jayanti* gathering in Asardoha was a local Maratha Deshmukh with whom Bhagwan enjoyed good relations, Sharad Gaikwad, a lecturer from Kolhapur University and Eknath Awad were the main speakers. Below are some portions of Awad's speech in Asardoha, which took an extremely high pitch while emphasising the backwardness of Mangs (and Mahars) and the possibilities of change through Phule-Ambedkarism.<sup>6</sup>

The status of Mangs in Maharashtra is worse than Adivasis.<sup>7</sup> No political leader will come and change the *samaj*, Eknath Awad too will not help. [ ... ] You will have to think and act and change yourself [ ... ] I am son of a *potraj*. Sharad [the lecturer] himself was a *potraj*. We both have changed. We believed in Phule-Ambedkari *vichar* like one believes in parents and that is how we could see the world [high pitch followed by applause here]. [ ... ] If you want to live as human beings then no one is going to serve it on a platter, for that you will have to struggle [*sangharsh*] against all the injustice that happens to you. And you will need to unite.

Our Atmaram Salave<sup>8</sup> used to sing in those days. I was in [Dalit] Panther then. Name the University after Bhima (Ambedkar) or else streams of blood will flow [*Vidyapeethala Naav Dya Bhimache Nahitar Path Vahatil Raktache*]. And our Mang boys and women sing [romantic songs],

<sup>6</sup>I attended various *jayantis* and other similar gatherings organised by MHA such as protests, *gaairan* holders meeting, women's SHG meetings. Portions of this particular speech are chosen due to its representative nature. Such meetings are also used by the workers of MHA to create and circulate the charisma of Awad as a national leader of Dalits who travels around the world regularly to raise issues facing Dalits.

<sup>7</sup>Adivasis (literally means indigenous people) refers to STs who are seen as most deprived in India especially in NGO discourses.

<sup>8</sup>Atmaram Salave was a known leader of Dalit Panther in Beed from Majalgaon taluka. He was an MA in English and was part of the group that decided to be unmarried and not own property for the cause of the movement. He was known for his radical songs that critiqued Hinduism. Atmaram died under mysterious circumstances and some Dalits think that he was murdered.

*Gaar Dongarachi Hava Gaar Ani Baaila Soseni Gaar* [the winds in the mountains are cold and the woman cannot tolerate this cold]. What do you have to do with that *gaarva* (cold)? [laughter]. [In high pitch] If you want to change, your mother and father will not change you. Your *mai-baap* [mother and father] are Phule, Ambedkar and Annabhau and only their *vichar* can change you [applause].

[...] Our people listen to Ramayan with a lot of interest. I have no objection to this, but for how long are you going to listen to stories? Listening to stories will not change your life. Your hard work is going to be the source of your change.

Annabhau said, change the world with a strike, so Bhimrao told me, you need to understand this [...] Do not feel bad because I speak like this. I speak because I am one of you [...] The only purpose of speaking is that this *samaj* [caste—here meaning Mang] changes. Instead of living like a *gulam* you should live like a human being. In the twenty-first century you have to live not like a *potraj* but as a *swabhimani* citizen and *samaj* [applause]. *Jai Bhim, Jai Anna*.

(Speech recorded: 24 August 2008)

There is an element of emotional antipathy towards *Jai Bhim* and Ambedkarism amongst the Mangs. Emotional speeches such as these seek to mobilise opinion in favour of Phule-Ambedkarite ideology against the troubled present and past of Mangs (and Mahars). Bonding of Mang-Mahar identities is facilitated by public discourses that take place in *jayantis*. The Mangs, however, are kept separate and are called to claim *swabhimani* through following Phule-Ambedkarism and in actual practice by challenging daily oppressions that they may be facing. Such claiming of *swabhimani* may lead to violence against Mangs which is considered part of the change process by the activists. Sadashiv, the district head of MHA in Beed, distinguished the Mangs of western Maharashtra from those of Marathwada in the following way:

In our discussion on the increasing violence against Dalits, particularly Mangs, Sadashiv told me that the situation here [Marathwada] was better than western Maharashtra. 'Here the Mangs are assertive and therefore the violence' [...] to elaborate his point, he pinched my left nipple and said, 'If a Maratha boy does this to a Mang girl in western Maharashtra, she will be happy and will go and tell her friends, '*Chotyia Malkane Asa Kela Mala*' [younger owner or landlord did this to me]. This is not the case here, Mangs are becoming aware. (Field notes: 27 January 2009)

The formation of *swabhimani* [self-respecting] Mang identity, thus, is also constructed around the critique of socio-religious practices that make *gulam* Mangs. The critique of religious practices such as *potraj* or *karan* is a regular discursive practice in public events. These are seen as inhuman practices that turn Mangs [and Mahars] into slaves [*gulam*]. The Phule-Ambedkarite ideology is associated with possibilities of progress and achievement for the current and coming generations through education, political organisation or through encroaching *gaairan*.

It is not only Mangs who carry out *gavaki* currently: in some cases Mahars also do so. The Mahars are, however, presented as an assertive community who got rid of such practices. Mahar, thus, is not the absolute 'other' in such discourses but a sociopolitical and cultural ally who progressed due to Ambedkarite ideology. The focus is on merging the Mahar and Mang identities as oppressed in an alliance for change under the Phule-Ambedkarite ideology. The category of Mang is, however, also kept separate in its extreme deprivation, backwardness and also the increasing violence Mangs face. The need for Mangs to organise their 'own' political clout and leadership is emphasised. The deprived and excluded past is described as a primitive existence like animals that one has to consciously move out of. Annabhau's respect for Babasaheb is brought to the fore by reminding participants that Annabhau dedicated his famous novel *Fakira* to Ambedkar. This is contrasted with the respect of Mangs for gods and goddesses. Speakers emphasise their own identity as Mangs and therefore take care to explain this.

Besides speeches that contribute in communicating with the participants in Annabhau *jayanti*, songs performed by local artists on harmonium and tabla are as effective. Some of the best local performers come from the Mang caste in Beed and are invited to perform on *jayantis* and other such occasions. Male and female participants both enjoy the music. Following are a few lines of the songs that were played by a musical group of Mang women artists. Some listeners gave prize money ranging between ₹10 and ₹500 to the performers (Field notes: 22 August 2008).

*Dev Dagdache Pujun Tula Aj Var Milala Kai* [Worshipping gods of stones  
you have got nothing till date]

*Ai Maai Tujhya Jivanacha Sona Majhya Bhimane Kela Ga Bai* [Oh mother,  
your life was made golden by my Ambedkar]

Another legend that is evoked in the song is Pochiram Kamble, a Mang who was killed by the Marathas during the *Namantar* violence.

He is said to have uttered *Jai Bhim* till his last breath despite being tortured to death by Marathas. His son is said to have taken revenge for his father's murder by killing the erring Marathas.<sup>9</sup> Such mobilisation of Mang pride through symbols of protest has led to politicisation by the MHA in Beed of some Mangs who have questioned their exclusion from the villages in various forms.

### ***The Politicisation of Bivaji and Family***

Participants of both BSP and MHA told me that the speeches they had heard during public gatherings were vital in changing their thinking. Bivaji (forty-eight) is one of the Mangs influenced by speeches of MHA workers. He used to be angered by *Jai Bhim* earlier, which he told me was not the case anymore. 'It all began when I participated in the *gaairan parishad* [meeting or convention] in Ambejogai, when I listened to *Jija* [Awad], my blood started boiling' (Interview: 25 September 2008). Bivaji has now also turned partially in favour of the cultural critique of the traditional Hindu beliefs (*Mari-ai*, *Mangir baba* and other gods) that circulates within the movement. Bivaji's son, Nitin is an active volunteer of MHA in Tandalwadi village. Along with others, Bivaji has also encroached *gaairan* land in Tandalwadi under the influence of the MHA.<sup>10</sup> Bivaji's family is also amongst those influenced by the charisma of Eknath Awad. Awad's riches<sup>11</sup> are also a matter of pride for some of the supporter of MHA as he moves around in one of the four SUV cars that he owns. When I asked Nitin 'Why do you support Awad when there are various others Mang leaders?' He replied, 'There is no person like *jija* [Awad] in our *samaj*, he is a man of millions [referring to Awad's riches], a big leader, he belongs to our caste and has not sold out like others'.

<sup>9</sup>Mang-Ambedkarites insist that Mang participation in *Namantar* struggle has been downsized by Mahar dominance. Daya Hirwale, a Mang writer has written a volume in Marathi on Mangs who lost their lives in the *Namantar* struggle.

<sup>10</sup>Bivaji's father, Tatyaram, shared that the past effort by the Dalits around twenty years ago was stamped by Marathas in the village. 'Marathas had mobilised money from each family to face the legal consequences of "cutting the legs" of Mahars and Mangs encroaching *gaairan*, which forced them to back off' (Interview: 25 September 2008).

<sup>11</sup>There is also criticism of Awad on these lines and one gets to hear regularly from other Mang leaders that Awad has earned a lot of money.

On the night I stayed at Bivaji's home a long discussion ensued between Bivaji, his wife (Bai), mother (Saku), father (Tatyaram) and his sons (Nitin and Raghu) on various issues including gods. Bivaji's father Tatyaram<sup>12</sup> (around sixty eight) disagreed with Bivaji's rude comments on gods and narrated how he and his brother had recovered from diarrhoea in their childhood when there was an epidemic in the village, due to *aai* [*Mari-aai*]. His mother had vowed to goddess *Mari-aai* that she will dedicate one of her sons as *potraj* to *Mari-aai* if her sons got cured. This had worked and Tatyaram felt that he and his brother were saved because of *aai*. Bivaji further questioned Tatyaram, 'If your *aai* is true, I will do the *karan* to cure Bai's [his wife's] knee pain, let us see if it gets cured'. Tatyaram felt that this was very much possible, 'but *aai* had nothing to do with knee ailments and the sacrifice will have to be made to god *khandoba*'. Bivaji probed further: 'What do these gods eat?' Tatyaram said, 'Nothing'. 'Then how do they survive?' asked Bivaji. Bai intervened at this point and said, 'Dogs pee on them, you see' [and laughed out loud]. Bai, however, did not seem to be a total believer in the rational, scientific discourse that her son advocates. I understood this when I had a long chat and interviewed two younger sisters of Tatyaram, Laxmi and Gulab. Both the sisters possess *aasara-aai* [goddesses of water] and *tul-japur bhawani-aai* in their bodies respectively. Gulab was the one who was possessed by the *aasara* and she told me that her goddess was with her all the time in various forms and that she had helped more than 100 couples conceive including Bai.<sup>13</sup>

Bai is an admirer of Manishatai who is the head of women's wing of MHA and is influenced by her speeches. When I asked Bai about the divine intervention from Gulab and *aai*, she nodded in agreement acknowledging this (Field notes: 26 September 2008). Bai travels through

<sup>12</sup>Tatyaram is also considered a local healer in the village and people see him to get cured of jaundice and snake bites. People use his prescriptions with modern medicines and he does not discourage this.

<sup>13</sup>Both the sisters explained to me the various social (including health) and economic problems of people that they solve through their access to goddesses. Some cases that the goddesses say cannot be handled are not dealt with. Some of the troubles (that people face) are engineered by priests (like them) who misuse their powers (and god) for wrong purposes. Despite her powers through access to goddesses, Laxmi sought advice from Nitin on the *gaairan* that she has encroached in Kaij. She aligned with another Mang organisation in Kaij led by Babasaheb Ghopale and had recently participated in the fasting protest that was organised for regularising of *gaairan*.

multiple identities based on the varied contexts of daily life. She appreciates the critique of religion and associated oppression of Mangs that the activists advocate but is not totally convinced that Gulab does not have direct access to *aasara-aa*. This is, however, not just the case with participants of movements. The activists too face dilemmas of identities in the competitive context of caste politics.

Saku was in tears while sharing the relative progress that her son and grandchildren had made especially after encroachment of *gaairan* and feared a Maratha backlash. The Mahars in this village had faced such violence earlier leading to some of them leaving the village for good. She expressed her fears, 'They (Maratha) say, earlier it was the Mahars who were *majalet* (excess body fat) and now it is the Mangs' (Field notes: 26 September 2008).

Mobilisation of MHA has thus politicised Mangs who challenge their exclusion in various forms. When I returned in January 2010 to Tandalwadi only Nitin was holding on to the critique of Hindu religious practices whereas Bivaji and Bai were not as convinced. Though there was disagreement on the ideological path to be followed, particularly giving up of Hindu religious practices, the family has continued cultivating the *gaairan* due to their politicisation through MHA. They also had a good crop of bajra (10 quintals) and were hoping to reap around 5 quintals jowar on the *gaairan* they were cultivating.

The collective identity of *swabhimani* Mangs is variedly achieved. In some villages, Mangs stop carrying out traditional caste occupations, enter the temple through protests, actively (and at times independently) participate in panchayat politics, organise *jayantis*, encroach *gaairan* lands and at times even convert to Buddhism. One of the most revealing outcomes of such *swabhimani* mobilisation processes is the emerging social solidarity amongst Mangs and Mahars locally, where they unite on various occasions like *jayanti*, protests, *gaairan* cultivation, and at times form political alliances during elections.

## Caste in Anti-caste Praxis of MHA Activists

An important critique in MHA activist narratives is of the Hindu dharma (religion). Dalit movements with Phule-Ambedkarite leanings question the relationship between status and power in caste and attribute most of Dalit exclusions to gradation of purity and pollution in

Hindu dharma. Chatterjee (1989) explores the subaltern consciousness on caste and offers a critique of Dumont (1980) for failing to understand that the 'dharma' of the minor sects has a *homo equalis* outlook. An attempt, therefore, has to be made to undertake a criticism of 'common sense' on the basis of 'common sense' which already exists in popular life (Chatterjee 1989). The dharma of Mangs and Mahars that revolves around local deities is not distinguished from Hindu religion in the politics of MHA. Activists instead capitalise on the symbols of Annabhau Sathe, Lahuji Salave and Mukta Salave which are constructed as protest icons against caste hierarchy that constructs Hinduism. These icons are turned into modern symbols of Mang pride as against *Mari-aai* or *potraj*. These symbols are interpreted in a form to suit their fusion with Phule-Ambedkarite ideologies. Some Mang activists of MHA have gone to the extent of changing their names from Hindu ones to Buddhist ones and one of the workers of MHA from Hingoli also heads Bouddha Mahasangh in Hingoli.

However, submerging of Mang identity into a Phule-Ambedkarite one is neither easy nor achieved everywhere. Some Mang workers regularly criticise the Hindu cultural practices of Mahars in informal and formal conversations, particularly their failure to become 'true Buddhists'. Sometimes such a critique is self-reflexive, for instance, a female activist at the *jayanti* in Punarvasan village was critical of MHA activists who preach Phule-Ambedkarite ideology but also do *karan* simultaneously (Field notes: 22 August 2008).

Mang participants of social movements respond to the competition amongst varied Mang and Dalit social movements by having multiple memberships. Interested Mangs attend meetings organised not only by MHA but by various sociopolitical formations including those organised by Mang segmental movements (Ghople, Dhobale Sakte, Bagawe). Only the activists are cautious of which meetings they attend as it may affect their standing both within and outside the movements.

Sudhamati (twenty-five), a single mother who had eloped with a Vanjari man only to be deserted later, is now an unpaid activist in MHA. Despite her MHA affiliations, she was appreciative of Mayawati's struggle as a single woman and said, 'Mayawati's work is good; she is a single woman but struggles for *samaj* [society]'. She was, however, critical of RPI leaders who had approached her with an offer to head the RPI's women's wing in Beed. She had declined this and was critical of RPI, particularly the Mahar dominance of RPI and their variety of activism that excluded Mangs.



RPI people feel that the language of Yerekar [Mang music performer who is not attached to any political party] is *aashlil* [obscene]. Yerekar in his songs says that Krishna (Hindu god) was involved in *randbaji* [sleeping with prostitutes]. What is wrong in that? [ ... ] Do they dislike Yerekar because he does not belong to their caste? (Field notes: 30 September 2008)

Sudhamati would, thus, question both Mahar dominance within RPI and also the compromising nature of their activism which is not critical enough of Hindu culture. Caste and caste symbols are turned into a matter of pride by the activists of MHA. When senior leaders of MHA met Sharad Pawar who was then the rural development minister (Government of India), and Narayan Rane who was then the revenue minister (Maharashtra) to lobby for regularising encroached *gaairan* lands for Dalits, another senior Mang worker of MHA handed over a letter to Sharad Pawar, requesting conferment of Bharat Ratna to Annabhau Sathe. He clarified, 'We will get *gaairan* anyways but this is a question of our *asmita* (selfhood)' (Field notes: 16 November 2008). Conferment of Bharat Ratna and respect to Annabhau is, thus, attached to the selfhood and self-respect of Mang identity which is seen as one beyond material needs such as that of *gaairan*.

In Asardoha *jayanti*, Sadashiv (thirty-eight) was another key leader of MHA who spoke on the need of cross-caste alliance based on Phule-Ambedkarite ideology and criticised turning *jayantis* into caste gatherings. Sadashiv, however, opposes every possibility of Mahar dominance in MHA by influencing Mang activists. He would also mobilise the opinion of the Mang women activists against the dominance of non-Mang women in MHA. While I was interviewing Sudhamati, Sadashiv, in his patronising fashion, intervened, 'What is wrong with Mang women? Why can't you speak? Has Taruni [non-Mang leader] taken the contract of speaking [for us]?' (Preliminary fieldwork: May 2007).

While Sadashiv resented Mahar dominance in MHA he also worked towards forming an assertive Mang identity. In another small meeting of Mangs in Kaij Taluka, in his speech Sadashiv commented on the saffron dressing of one of the male participants (he was wearing saffron towel with a tika on forehead) to remind him of his Mang identity, 'If you wear *bhagwa* [saffron], you are not going to be *Chatrapati* [implied Maratha], you are a Mang. If you put a *gandha cha tikala* [a saffron mark on forehead], no one is going to call you *Chatrapati*, you will still be Mang or Mahar' (Field notes: 25 September 2008). The cultural proximity of Mangs and Mahars comes in handy while polarising these

identities against inequalities of caste and creating a Phule-Ambedkarite community, but this is not always the case. While a need to emphasise Mang-Mahar unity is seen, RPI and other similar factions are shown as symbols of Mahar unity and Mangs have the hope of MHA's Awad's genuine leadership.

When faced with other competitive Mang organisations and their leaders, Sadashiv holds on to Phule-Ambedkarism and his loyalty to Awad. Sadashiv and I happened to interact with Reddy, leader of Lahuji Sena [Lahuji's Army] in Mumbai. Sadashiv was in Mumbai to drop invitations to Mang members of the Legislative Assembly to participate in a meeting that MHA was holding to discuss the findings of a state commission on the socio-economic status of Mangs in Maharashtra. On seeing Reddy, Sadashiv decided to hand over an invitation to him as well. Sadashiv greeted Reddy with 'Jai Lahuji' and introduced himself as Sadashiv Londe and handed over a copy of the invitation letter. Looking at Sadashiv, Reddy said 'Londe [ ... ] Are you the same who had spoiled [*udhalali*] my *sabha* [meeting] in Paithan? Yes, you are the one', he insisted. 'No', said Sadashiv giving a surprised look, 'There are a lot of Londes in Paithan, it must have been someone else'. 'You work with Awad, don't you?' asked Reddy. Sadashiv replied, 'Yes'. Reddy was still thinking to be sure. He simultaneously read the invitation letter and saw the names of Eknath Awad and another co-organiser. He looked at Sadashiv again and asked, 'Why is Awad doing all this for Mangs. He is no more a Mang, he has become a Buddhist now, isn't he a Mahar now? He should work for Buddhists [ ... ] He has earned a lot of money'. Looking at us he continued, 'Mangs are Hindus, Eknath Awad should hold such meetings for Buddhists and call us for such meetings'. Sadashiv did not respond for a while. However, after Reddy's persistent questioning, Sadashiv responded briefly, 'With the limited knowledge I have, I think we should remember what Mukta Salve said, "We do not have a religion"'. Reddy seemed least interested in listening to Sadashiv, though he also seemed to agree with him, 'Leave all that [*soda te sagla*]' replied Reddy, 'I will come for the meeting and ask Awad about this. He is a friend, I won't leave him'. He gave us his visiting card and continued, 'What was the hurry [about conversions]? Why did he go alone? How can he be a Mang again now?' (Field notes: 13 February 2008).

The MHA, thus, functions within a competitive field and context of Mang organisations. These organisations base their criticism of MHA and Awad for becoming a Mahar (by converting to Buddhism) and for making money through NGOs. The MHA, however, carves its specific

space within Mang organisations and other Dalit organisations by resorting to politicisation of Mangs and through attracting them towards Ambedkar. They criticise other Mang organisations for their particularistic agenda which is not seen as an ideological one. The MHA also resorts to the opportunistic utility of Mang identity but tries to ensure it has an Ambedkarite orientation.

Sadashiv and I came out of the hotel after this conversation. Sadashiv burst into laughter and said, 'Did you hear him? Sir, Let me tell you I was exactly the same fifteen years back.' He added, 'I was the one who spoiled his *karyakram* [programme] in Paithan. He talked on *daiva-vad* (fate-ism) and I spoke Mukta Salve, Pochiram<sup>14</sup> and Babasaheb after him and got a good response from the audience' (Field notes: 13 February 2008).

Sadashiv, thus, innovatively combines Mang identity with Phule-Ambedkarite ideology in his daily practice. Awad would jokingly term Sadashiv 'a Mang Neta' (Mang leader) and not a Dalit or Bahujan leader as Sadashiv had earlier worked with another Mang particularistic movement, which was known for its anti-Mahar and pro-Hindutva position. He was attracted towards MHA slowly and had changed his views over time.<sup>15</sup>

The identity of Mang, Dalit and Bahujan is, thus, put to use variedly in MHA based on the dialectics of internal (agency) and external (structure) pressures. The public discourses of MHA have radical contesting features in their critique of Hindu cultural practices that demean and deny possibilities of citizenship for Mangs (and all Dalits). The MHA creates a culture of anti-caste conversations amongst the Mangs which is critical of the traditional Mang identity and existence. *Jayanti* celebrations and critical informal conversations amongst the activists and participants of MHA are venues of alternative public deliberations which are also heterogeneous in communication and outcomes. These result in social solidarities between Mangs and other SCs, particularly Mahars. The MHA thus contributes to the creation of an alternative public sphere, counter-culture and arguments against caste hegemony.

<sup>14</sup>Pochiram was a Mang who was killed in caste violence during *Namantar* riots. Some movement songs portray Pochiram and his radicalism in his sacrifice for Ambedkarite ideology till the end.

<sup>15</sup>There are also material reasons for such attraction. Sadashiv earns his salary from one of the projects of RDC. Some of the Mang activists envied Sadashiv as he was more successful in getting schemes for those related to him amongst the activists. Similarly, Bivaji too has partial material reasons (*gaarian*) for becoming Ambedkarite.

## Reconstructing Caste from Below

The making of Ambedkarite Mangs in MHA illuminates further the dynamic nature of caste, its innovative interpretation and strategic use in Dalit politics. Mang identity though blurred faces competitive politics of consolidation in Maharashtra. The dominant political and cultural forces (both Hindutva and Congress) mostly contribute to substantialisation of the Mangs to counter the 'rise of Mahars'. Mang assimilation within the mainstream politics thus is based on repulsion toward Mahars and suppression of Mang dissent against caste hierarchies. The case of Phule-Ambedkarite Mangs, however, marks movement of assertive Ambedkarite politics beyond Mahars that bring Mangs into conflict with dominant castes.

Jati in the public discourses of Phule-Ambedkarite Mangs is both difference and hierarchy and difference (Mang) is mobilised against the perceived hierarchy of caste system. The 'difference' is, however, a political one and not limited to sociocultural, where Mang is constructed as 'deprived', 'not organised', 'not Ambedkarite' and 'not educated'. As suggested by Bayly (1999: 314), the interpenetrations of caste concerns with caste-free thought are apparent throughout India. To this, MHA is no exception despite its anti-caste ideological claims.

Further understanding of castes as discrete categories where each caste has intrinsic worth (Gupta 1991: 130) may not help in analysing the public performance and political utility of caste in Dalit movements. While difference, or the discrete nature of caste, can be examined through culture and internal circulation of substance amongst the jatis, caste and Dalit movements play a vital role in the public sphere and the making of civil society.

Participants and activists of MHA, thus, contribute to constructing and reconstructing caste. While the ideal to be achieved is abolition of the caste hierarchy, MHA's praxis in its relational contexts also contributes to the reconstructing Mang identities. The practice of MHA challenges the status and power relationship in caste by constructing *swabhimani* Mangs and facilitating *sangharsh*. As opposed to politics of assimilation and sanskritisation, MHA's mobilisation, aids 'ethnicisation' that sustains ideology of pre-Aryanism or Buddhism and provides alternative imaginaries for radical transformation (Jaffrelot 2000).

# 7

## Electoral Politics and Dalit Freedoms

Party politics is a project of *manav mukti* (Human Liberation) and Ambedkar's followers can carry it out the best.

(Sham Tangade, President of Praduddha Republican Party)

Voting rights constitute a major step towards democratic deepening and equal citizenship. Dalit belief in democratic processes and institutions is reflected in their robust participation in electoral politics, both in voting and formation of political parties. The history of Dalit struggle for the 'rights to have rights' as equal citizens, however, has been one of conflict with the mainstream political parties and the colonial and post-colonial state. Dalit claims for citizenship were in direct conflict with the inner realm of Hindu culture, which were considered pure and private by the Hindu political elites. A key point of contention for the Congress was autonomous Dalit politics that was 'separatist' in nature and purged untouchables from Hindu culture. Dalit claims continue to be considered a matter of deviation even after the collapse of the Congress system. Electoral politics, thus, is not void of the conflict between elite cultural celebration and Dalit struggles for civility and complete citizenship.

This chapter contextualises Dalit participation in electoral politics. The year 2009 was the year of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha Elections in Maharashtra. The participation of BSP and MHA in the elections of 2009 helps us delve on dynamics and challenges Dalits face in electoral arenas. The first section maps the bipolar politics in Beed, which is dominated by Marathas operating through the NCP and contested by the Vanjaris through BJP. The next two sections discuss the marginal location

and strategies of BSP and MHA, respectively. While the case of BSP is one of autonomous Dalit politics, MHA in 2009 played assimilative role by joining NCP. The challenges to sustenance and practice of Dalit autonomy in political fields highlight the institutionalisation of Dalit exclusion through patronage practices that strengthen the state vis-à-vis Maratha dominance. Dalit movements attempt to contest the mainstream cultural codes of electoral politics. These practices are, however, riddled with challenges and Dalit movements do at times end up replicating mainstream politics.

### Electoral Competition in Beed—The Maratha NCP and Non-Maratha Accommodation

Some activist friends in Beed and I were at the tea stall near a beef-eating joint which we regularly visited for lunch, some Muslim men here were discussing elections with statistics and community-wise voting, one of them predicted NCP win with confidence—'*Maratha ke 6 lakh, Vanjari ke 4 lakh, Momedan ke 2.5 lakh aur Harijan ke 2 lakh*,<sup>1</sup> NCP will win as the Muslims will go with Congress (NCP)'. (Field notes: 9 April 2009)

The NCP win was seen as a certainty in Lok Sabha elections given the definitive logic that merged preponderance of Marathas with the inevitable Muslim support to NCP. The internal competition within NCP, however, made the possibilities of this win difficult. Though NCP is synonymous with Maratha power in Marathwada, the control of Marathas is not absolute. The non-Marathas in NCP compete within themselves to hold their marginal but important locations in the Maratha party. Similarly, the locally powerful Maratha leaders too compete to expand their control of resources and patronage within the party. Elections are the critical events for the local political power holders to reconsolidate their strength through intense competition both within and outside the party and money along with caste plays a key role in such politicking. The local MLAs and their

<sup>1</sup>These numbers mentioned in this discussion were very close to what was reported in local newspapers. During the 2009 general elections, of the total 16 lakh 33 thousand voters, Marathas constituted 5.50 lakh, Vanjaris 4.50 lakh, Dalits and Muslims together constituted 4 lakh votes and other voters were around 2 lakh (LNS 2009).

powerful competitors in Beed thus have a thick network of control and patronage that runs deep to control all the development and administrative institutions of state. Local elections like those of credit cooperatives, Zilla Parishad, panchayat samiti and panchayats that hold the state opportunity structure are therefore much more fierce and competitive where money and caste get played in the crudest forms.

Interestingly, however, the overwhelming competition for non-Marathas in the NCP is internal rather than the Maratha control of the party. For instance, on 9 August 2008, there was an incidence of violence within the non-Maratha workers of NCP in Beed Town. This scuffle was between Telis and Vanjaris and a Mahar supporter of a Teli leader was shot by a Vanjari leader. Jaydutt Kshirsagar, a powerful Teli leader within NCP, is a key non-Maratha leader and has a family lineage of holding power in Congress (I). His mother was elected Member of Parliament from Beed twice consecutively as a Congress (I) candidate in 1980 and 1984. Kshirsagar moved to NCP after its formation. Though he does not enjoy the stature that his mother enjoyed in Congress, he still remains a powerful leader locally because of his control of various government-aided educational institutions in Beed. He also serves as a non-Maratha face of NCP to challenge BJP, which claims to be a party of 'Bahujans' under Gopinath Munde.

In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections such divisions within NCP were played overtly in Beed. Ramesh Adaskar, son of veteran Maratha Baburao Adaskar (who is known locally for his wealth, Maratha might and opposition to *Namantar*) was the NCP candidate against Gopinath Munde. Adaskar's elevation as a Lok Sabha candidate was drastic as he was mere Zilla Parishad member. During election campaigning, discontented Marathas and Kshirsagar did not put their full support behind Adaskar. Some of campaigners from Kshirsagar's group instead of campaigning for Adaskar would explain the difficult task of beating Munde in the Lok Sabha elections. Kshirsagar was in charge for campaigning in the Beed Vidhan Sabha segment, a stronghold of his. NCP polled only 66,554 votes in the Lok Sabha election of April–May 2009,<sup>2</sup> which Adaskar was contesting; however, in the Beed Vidhan Sabha elections of October 2009 that Kshirsagar contested he polled 109,163 votes (see Table 7.1). Dalit respondents from NCP attributed the difference in votes to the halfhearted campaign of Kshirsagar.

<sup>2</sup>All figures for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections 2009 are from the report compiled by Maharashtra Election commission. Available at <http://220.225.73.214/pdf/lokresult.pdf> (accessed on 12 January 2012).

Some of the Maratha leaders too were discontent with Ramesh Adaskar's elevation from a Zilla Parishad member to a Lok Sabha candidate. Dalit campaigners of Adaskar's group informed me that the dissenting Marathas and Kshirsagar were not liberal in spending money for campaigning. Adaskar, however, did mobilise caste emotions of the Marathas during the campaigning making it a direct fight between Marathas and Vanjaris. *Assal Maratha Ek Vha* (real Marathas unite) and *Vajawa Tutari Hatava Vanjari* (play the *tutari* [a kind of trumpet associated with Maratha warriorhood] and chase away the Vanjari) were the SMS messages circulated within the Maratha circles respondents alleged.

### **BJP and NCP as Synonyms for Dominant Political Culture? Locating Dalit Politics at Margins**

Electoral politics in Beed besides being competition between Vanjaris and Marathas through BJP and NCP is also a tussle within dominant Marathas who switch to the opposite parties when disgruntled. The BJP though Vanjari dominated in Beed is not absolutely so as the Vanjaris constitute a numerical dominant force only in Parali Vidhan Sabha constituency, in the rest of Beed they are marginal numerically. The numerical compulsion of Munde to secure non-Vanjari votes works well for Maratha leaders (disgruntled in NCP) who move between NCP and BJP to suit their interests while the Vanjaris largely remain attached to BJP because of Munde. Palshikar and Birmal (2004: 5470) rightly suggest that both NCP and Shiv Sena are Maratha dominated parties, 'the social base of NCP and Shiv Sena is identical except for the support to the former by the Dalit and Muslim community'. Indeed, in the present Vidhan Sabha of the 288 members, over 170 are Marathas (Marpakwar 2010).

The Vanjari supporters of Munde (not BJP) used anti-Vanjari mobilisation of NCP during the Lok Sabha elections to portray Munde as a 'Bahujan' leader. Munde's landslide victory over Adaskar was attributed to Munde's generosity in incurring electoral expenses, which were estimated to be far higher than NCP. One Vanjari supporter told me, 'He spend lots [ ... ] around ₹150 crore, he bought over all the Marathas (leaders) overnight'. Vanjari supporters of Munde also resorted to violence against Vanjaris who were campaigning for NCP. Munde polled 51 per cent votes and won the elections with the highest winning margin



in Maharashtra of 140,571. In Beed, Munde remains absolute leader of BJP with no leadership roles assigned outside his family; he has also remained committed to Vanjari development,<sup>3</sup> thus, monopolising the Vanjari vote.

The local political leaders from Maratha and Vanjari castes have a thick network of power spread till the villages through control of local bodies. The Maratha leaders are more powerful than the Vanjaris due to their strong hold over all the state institutions, land and their numerical advantage. The expanding developmental state in rural India further offers new patronage opportunities to these political elites thus consolidating identity politics (Chandra 2004). With the growth of Congress and BJP and the rising patronage culture in politics, the parties with Left ideology have shrunk in the political landscapes of Beed. The leader of Peasants and Workers Party of India (PWPI), a Maratha with Left leanings who polled 32,618 in the Majalgaon assembly elections of 2004, had come down to a meagre 10,077 votes in 2009. He attributed his shrinking support to the 'money power' of BJP and Congress candidates who distributed money, liquor and meat for votes (Interview: 8 January 2010). Another Left influenced female Vanjari leader who had hopped between all major parties except BJP observed, 'Earlier there was a need to go and work with people, now any one becomes a leader by putting their cardboard cut outs on the streets' (Interview: 29 January 2010).

Dalits in BJP and NCP do not hold any positions of importance in Beed nor do Dalit needs figure prominently in their manifestos. In the political rallies, both BJP and NCP emphasised that their objective was to hoist Shivaji's flag on the *Lal Qi'lah* (Red Fort, symbolises capturing Delhi/India) while the former emphasised the saffron colour of the flag the latter did not. The NCP symbolically printed pictures of Athawale and used blue flags in political rallies as RPI (A) was in alliance with NCP-Congress during Lok Sabha elections. The manifestos circulated by BJP and NCP during these elections in Beed were almost identical in their emphasis on addressing issues such as rail, roads, irrigation, industries, electricity, education, employment, water

<sup>3</sup>It is local knowledge in Beed that Vanjaris benefited most when Munde was deputy chief minister during the BJP-SS rule. The Vanjaris over time in Beed have consolidated their power in the local state opportunity structure. They, however, remain dependent on Marathas (dissidents of NCP) in areas other than Parali to sustain their power.

and health. Both noted only one identical issue for Dalits—‘schemes pertaining to hostels for Dalit students’ will be implemented. Issues such as *gaairaan*, caste atrocities and their exclusion from District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), list of Below Poverty Line (BPL), which affected the rural Dalits, were not of importance. The silence of state and Dalit political representatives from NCP is most visible in cases of caste violence against Dalits.

In terms of autonomous Dalit participation and performance, BSP was the main party in Beed for both Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections of 2009. The BBM was another key Dalit political party in Lok Sabha elections, which polled 11,006 votes. It, however, did not contest any of the Vidhan Sabha seats in Beed (see Table 7.1). RPI (A) turned assertive momentarily in the months following Lok Sabha elections as the Vidhan Sabha elections closed in. RPI (A) leader Ramdas Athawale lost the 2009 Lok Sabha election in newly reserved Shirdi constituency and alleged that his defeat was a Congress ploy. He, therefore, severed ties with Congress-NCP and mobilised factions of RPI to unite against Congress in a RPI-led Third Front. Smaller and important players such as PWPI who had supported Congress in the Lok Sabha elections due to its ‘secular’ credentials switched to be part of the RPI-led Third Front. BBM (led by Prakash Ambedkar), however, stayed away from the RPI unity efforts insisting that they were opportunistic and not ideological.

The RPI (A) contested the Beed Vidhan Sabha constituency as part of the Third Front and gained some non-Dalit support as Syed Salim, a local politically prominent Muslim, was the candidate. Syed Salim had won the Beed Vidhan Sabha seat in 1999 on NCP ticket and lost in 2004. The Beed Vidhan Sabha constituency was an issue of conflict between Jaydutt Kshirsagar and Syed Salim and the Maratha leadership had to solve this. Sensing that the seat may be given to Salim or to a Maratha, Kshirsagar had prepared to contest as an independent candidate. Syed raised the issue of Muslim representation in NCP, he was however denied the ticket and Kshirsagar bagged it. Syed protested by contesting as RPI (A) led Third Front candidate and polled 32,999 votes in Beed. Opposition to NCP by the OBCs and Muslims is not long lasting and Syed rejoined NCP in February 2010 when it came to power. While the Lok Sabha seat of Beed was won by BJP, of the six Vidhan Sabha seats in Beed, NCP had won five. It was only the Vanjari stronghold of Parali that was bagged by Pankaja Munde, daughter of Gopinath Munde. There were moments of informal aligning between BSP workers and RPI (A)

in Beed as RPI workers used pamphlets issued by BSP workers giving details of NCP [Marathas] involvement in shielding ‘atrocities’ perpetrators against Dalits in Marathwada.

The NCP lost the Lok Sabha elections because of internal competition and Vidhan Sabha elections saw it return. Autonomous Dalit parties remained marginal, illustrating how the Dalit relationship with state is one of continued exclusion and electoral politics institutionalises such exclusion. Dalits and Dalit movements do not have the economic capital required to win elections and numerically too they are marginal.

Within this context of party politics the BSP and MHA operate as marginal but vibrant actors in Beed. BSP largely keeps at bay from agitations in its political performance terming agitations as mere reactions that are not constructive and valuable in the long run, whereas MHA couples protests with participation in electoral politics. In the 2009 elections [Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha], BSP continued with autonomous politics that involved purging Dalit votes from mainstream parties and attracting non-Dalits. The MHA, on the other hand, played an assimilative role by supporting NCP. I will present the electoral practices and marginalisation of BSP and MHA in the following sections.

**Table 7.1:**  
*Vote Share of Mainstream Parties and Dalit Parties in Beed*

| <i>Lok Sabha Elections April 2009</i>      |               |                  |             |               |               |               |              |
|--|---------------|------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
|  | <i>Georai</i> | <i>Majalgaon</i> | <i>Beed</i> | <i>Ashti</i>  | <i>Kaij</i>   | <i>Parali</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| <b>BJP</b>                                 | 93,779        | 81,901           | 77,659      | 109,971       | 91,958        | 98,673        | 553,994      |
| <b>NCP*</b>                                | 68,284        | 70,143           | 66,554      | 70,737        | 82,377        | 54,925        | 413,423      |
| <b>BSP</b>                                 | 4,446         | 4,273            | 3,009       | 4,221         | 5,681         | 3,654         | 25,284       |
| <b>BBM</b>                                 | 2,224         | 2,248            | 1,347       | 2,126         | 1,670         | 1,391         | 11,006       |
| <i>Vidhan Sabha Elections October 2009</i> |               |                  |             |               |               |               |              |
|  | <i>Georai</i> | <i>Majalgaon</i> | <i>Beed</i> | <i>Ashti</i>  | <i>Kaij</i>   | <i>Parali</i> | —            |
| <b>BJP</b>                                 | 98,469        | 79,034           | 33,246      | 84,157        | 66,188        | 96,222        | —            |
| <b>NCP*</b>                                | 100,816       | 86,943           | 109,163     | 118,847       | 110,452       | 60,160        | —            |
| <b>BSP</b>                                 | Withdrawn     | 1,948            | 1,551       | 2,369         | 3,917         | 3,662         | —            |
| <b>RPI (A)</b>                             | Not Contested | Not Contested    | 32,999      | Not Contested | Not Contested | 1,144         | —            |

**Source:** Compiled from Election Commission figures.

**Notes:** \*The MHA supported NCP in both Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha Elections.

## BSP in 2009 Elections: Mobilising for Blue Flag on Red Fort

The BSP's electoral campaigning in Maharashtra kicked off immediately after its victory in the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha elections of May 2007. *UP Hui Hamari Hain Ab Dilli Ki Baari Hain* (UP is ours and now it is time for Delhi) was the new slogan amongst the workers. 'One of the important changes that followed after BSP capturing power several times has been that of changing the Indian "culture of politics" where BSP introduced SCs as political rulers' (Hardtmann 2009: 129–130). In the political fields of Marathwada where securing justice for Dalits even in cases of caste violence is an uphill task, 'Dalits as rulers' served as a real morale booster for Dalit activists. Overall a sense of self-belief and hope prevailed amongst the BSP cadre in Maharashtra, a state where BSP was yet to win a single Vidhan Sabha or Lok Sabha seat and the leadership of Dalits did not hinder attraction of non-Dalits to the party.

Workers from Beed attended a massive rally of BSP party workers held in Mumbai in November 2007, which was addressed by Mayawati. Some bigwig dissidents from Congress joined BSP on this occasion and others followed later. The Dalit-Brahman alliance in UP and the new-found slogan of *sarvajan hitay* (welfare of all communities/castes) also gained some currency amongst the workers locally. As the Lok Sabha elections of 2009 closed in non-Dalit newspapers (including the English ones) carried reports and articles on the possibility of Mayawati emerging as prime minister in case of hung parliament. The cadres attributed the newspaper and media coverage to inclusion of Brahmins in the party.<sup>4</sup> Some notable Brahmins in Maharashtra joined BSP including the Brahmin priest of Kalaram temple, who apologised for his grandfather not letting Ambedkar and his followers into the temple. Another formidable Brahmin was D.S. Kulkarni a multimillionaire builder from Pune who contested the Lok Sabha seat in Pune.

In Marathwada too some leaders joined including Bhimrao Hattiam-bire from neighbouring Parbhani, a Dalit from NCP who termed this a 'home coming' and organised a rally of around 50,000 people to mark his entry in BSP. Locally in Beed, cadres mobilised resources and organised more cadre trainings, meetings and performances to mobilise Dalits, OBCs and Muslims to make Mayawati the 'PM of India'. It was usual to

<sup>4</sup>While news reports in Marathi were read by workers, the English ones were translated in Marathi and circulated in some Dalit magazines.

find stickers (on bikes and cars) and screensavers on mobile phones of BSP cadres that displayed pictures of Mayawati with text below stating 'Prime Minister 2009'. More BSP literature also came in circulation locally; for instance, *Ambedkar Today*<sup>5</sup> published in Hindi from Lucknow/Delhi was sold locally during meetings.

Non-Mahar and non-BSP Dalits too were attracted to BSP during this period as seen in Chapter Five. The leaders of RPI factions were critical of BSP but some of its local workers moved to BSP in Beed. The success of BSP in UP had raised hopes amongst the Dalits of the possibility of making a Dalit chief minister without any patronage. A Bauddha (Mahar) supporter of RPI who attended a BSP meeting explained:

Mayawati has become chief minister of UP, I feel proud [*abhiman vatato*] about it. I hope someone from Dalit *samaj* should become chief minister here too. (Field notes: 23 January 2009)

Dalit supporters of various sociopolitical factions that I came across would informally share their happiness over BSP gaining political power in UP and Mayawati becoming chief minister. Besides an increase in Dalit following, some non-Dalits joined BSP which included OBCs, Muslims and Brahmins in Beed. The key Dalit opponents of BSP were RPI (A) and BBM and the debate, thus, was on claiming moral high ground and on being the true inheritors of Ambedkar. In their political rallies, leaders of RPI (A) would criticise BSP as not being a party of republican<sup>6</sup> lineage and for being a UP party, whereas BSP leaders would not acknowledge the RPI factions and focus on criticising BJP and Congress as enemies of Dalit. In their informal conversations, the cadre and supporters of BSP would call the leaders of RPI stooges who were sold out to Congress.

The cadres were aware that not all were joining the party because of ideology and that the growing political clout of BSP was also a reason. The BSP for some was also a source of what some the cadres termed

<sup>5</sup>This magazine contained details of policies of BSP government in UP that were presented as in line with Ambedkarite ideology, articles on Ambedkar, Kan-shiram and Mayawati and occasional criticism of caste beliefs and values of Hinduism. The cadres read this magazine with great interest. It was, however, banned by BSP Government in UP in 2010 after litigation filed against its editor for criticising Hindu religion as a system of inequality.

<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note that locally the word republican has become synonymous with Dalits, particularly Mahar dominated parties.

'*Lagao Le Jao*' (invest some, take lots) especially if they were made the candidates or had a role in identifying the candidate. The BSP workers would, however, use Kanshiram's description of such entrants as *siddi* (ladder). *Siddi* contrasted to the committed cadres or 'missionaries' (synonymous mostly with Dalits)—are those who enter the party with 'selfish' purposes and see the BSP as an opportunity for their economic and gains. The missionaries, however, stick to the party irrespective of its performance in elections. Stories of 'missionary' sacrifices are common amongst the cadre. While Kanshiram and Mayawati are considered the pinnacle of such sacrifice—having given up family life for the party—various local names are evoked too. 'Missionaries' are seen as the bedrock of the party who understand not only the conservative behaviour of the ladders but also the utility of ladders to help reach their goal of 'political power'.

The workers of BSP actively laboured to replicate the *bhaichara* (brotherhood) model of UP in Beed which involved forming committees of various castes/religions. *Bhaichara* committees of various castes came up locally, such as the Vanjari *bhaichara*, the Muslim *bhaichara*, the Mali (gardener) *bhaichara*, the Kaikadi (nomadic tribe) *bhaichara*, Dhangar *bhaichara* and Maratha *bhaichara*. Those non-Dalit leaders that approached BSP workers or those who were mobilised by the workers were made heads of these *bhaichara* committees and Dalit workers were the secretaries.

One of the notable distinctions of BSP's campaigning was its deliberation of Bahujan ideology both in mass campaigns and closed door cadre trainings, these included emphasising the 'right to vote' as a remarkable breakthrough in the history of India for Bahujans, voting for Bahujan ideology and not for money, Congress and BJP as anti-people (Bahujan) and BSP and Behenji (Mayawati) as the only hope. There were no promises made in the campaigning though some policies in UP were provided as evidence of change brought in by BSP there. Mayawati's charisma was, thus, strengthened by emphasising her 'Ambedkarite' power through cadre camps, public meetings, reading materials and musical performances. Mayawati and BSP were presented as the only alternative for Ambedkarites if they hoped to see the *blue flag on the Red Fort*. Around one lakh people attended Mayawati's rally in Nagpur on 8 April 2009, which included a large number of women.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>As the elections neared the cadres of BSP did not have to pay for their own travel. The money provided by the candidates helped in organising travel for cadre and participants.

Mayawati appeared on the stage along with Satish Chandra Mishra [a Brahmin]. Everyone was up on their feet; there was some chaos with people wanting to catch a glimpse of her. Mayawati came and waved at the crowd in all directions, the crowd responded similarly. [ ... ] Sachan introduced Mayawati as *Bharatvarsha ki Gaurav*, (the pride of India) the heartbeat of *sarva-samaj* [ ... ] and the future prime minister of India. (Field notes: 8 April 2009)

In her speech at Nagpur, Mayawati reiterated the intersection of identity and interests of Bahujans and the quest of BSP as an ideology-based movement to serve the interests of not just Bahujans but *sarvajans*.

It is sad that despite sixty one years of independence in our country, Bahujan *samaj* [explains—includes SC, ST, OBC and religious minorities such as Sikh, Muslim, Christians, Parsi and Baudha], their social and economic conditions have not changed much [ ... ] In some states the poor have become naxals because of continued poverty. We believe that Congress and other opposition parties are responsible for this [ ... ] Both Congress and BJP came into power with the help of capitalists and after coming to power, these governments [ ... ] made economic policies [ ... ] to profit the big capitalists. BSP is the only party in the country which does not take money from big capitalists or sugar barons (*seth*) to run the party it collects money from lay workers who earn this money through blood and sweat [Claps here]. (Speech recorded: 8 April 2009)

Support for BSP was mobilised through portraying BSP (and Mayawati) as a Bahujan party following Phule-Ambedkarite ideology and identifying the failure of Congress and BJP in providing dignity and poverty-free life to Bahujans. Campaigning was carried by the cadre without identifying the candidate/s to contest the elections and mobilisation was in favour of party (and Mayawati) and not the candidate. The cadre focussed on expanding the base of BSP by roping in Dalits and interested non-Dalits. BSP was also an opportunity to make money during the elections for some of the new entrants. It was difficult for the committed cadre to distinguish those who would stick in BSP in the long run from those who had entered for brokering, as the new entrants too would adapt to the Bahujan vocabulary in no time. Identifying the right candidate was therefore the most difficult but critical exercise for BSP workers.

Maharashtra state-in-charge of BSP were two leaders (one Kurmi and one Chamar) from UP, one of them was Member of Parliament in Rajya Sabha. In the special cadre training for the workers on elections the MP insisted on strengthening the organisation till the grassroots, i.e., voting

booths and sectors as the success of BSP in UP was based on taking the *bhaichara* and *sanghathan* (organisation) to the lowest level. The workers were motivated to volunteer (time and money) for the Ambedkarite mission of creating a *Samata Mulak Samaj* (society based on principles of equality). ‘Other parties have money we have movement and ideology’ was the message for the cadres’ (Field notes: 31 January 2009). Some important precautions suggested for the elections included, being wary of (mainstream) media, possibility of candidate or even workers getting sold out and therefore the need for commitment to party and not candidate—‘our candidate is the elephant (party symbol) and not any individual’ (Field notes: 7 December 2008).

The taluka and district committees of BSP were criticised regularly by state-in-charge in the review meetings for not reaching out till the lowest level. Such demands of accountability from the district and taluka committees were not accompanied with financial support for building organisation. Money was to be mobilised from supporters and well-wishers, key amongst them was BAMCEF. BAMCEF had mobilised ₹60,000 for the party fund on *Aarthik Sahyog Divas* (Economic Cooperation Day synonymous with Mayawati’s birthday) and the cadre too had done their bit. This money had, however, gone to the party fund and was not available for local campaigning.

### ***Identifying Candidates: Siddis (Ladders) over Missionaries***

The cadre and the leaders of BSP were aware of economic costs of campaigning during the elections. Since the BSP does not distribute doles to voters or brokers, the workers are short of money even for travel during campaigning. The candidate, thus, if economically powerful was considered a good resource for expanding the party base through campaigning. This also meant that the cadres could not move up the party’s organisational hierarchy, they however emphasised their voluntary spirit in supporting BSP and its ideology.

The names of BSP candidates for other Lok Sabha constituencies in Maharashtra had started rolling out from February onwards. In Beed, however, the candidate was not identified till early April. Part of the problem was in Munde being a powerful candidate and no one was willing to gamble their resources on what seemed to be a sure loss. The cadres of BSP were close to convincing a Brahmin known in Beed for his kirtans (religious songs), but the leaders of BJP intervened.



A meeting of BSP workers (BAMCEF and party functionaries) in Beed was organised to discuss the 'type' of candidate they wanted. This was an interesting occasion to witness the conflict between principled politics and real politics as caste and money came to be discussed as the criteria for identifying the candidate with some cadres calling for a balance between money/caste and ideology in the candidate. These choices were, however, influenced by the pervasive political culture and compulsions of BSP locally and not just ideology.

We are all minorities here, Muslim, Mahar, Brahman [ ... ] Ours is a politics of minority (*alpasankhya*) [ ... ] We should be giving the ticket to anyone who believes in social engineering and also to someone who does not split after the elections.

(A Brahmin worker)

Money is important and we need money for *prachar* (campaigning) [ ... ] and for spreading our *vichardhara* [ideology]. Identify a candidate who has money and believes in (our) ideology.

(A Mahar worker)

I have only one request; do not do caste politics. Our party believes in having no caste, then why caste? Why do we support the party, it is because of the *vichar*. An economically strong candidate can help but that will be *kshanik sukh* (temporary bliss). I am working with the party for fifteen years just because of the *vichar*.

(A Parit worker)

BJP has fielded a Vanjari and NCP, a Maratha. We should look at the caste arithmetic and give the ticket to Dhargar, Laman, Muslim or a Mali. The candidate has to be economically strong. He should be able to provide at least five vehicles (for campaigning) in each Vidhan Sabha. We should form all the *bhaichara* too in this process.

(A Mahar worker)

Beed has a good Muslim population, we could consider giving it to Muslim or we can also give it to a Dhargar. We need a strong candidate, give primacy to a Muslim.

(A Mang worker)

(Field notes: 10 March 2009)

The possibility of Dalit candidates or missionaries contesting was hardly raised; those who thought on these lines reiterated the difficulty of finding someone with the resources for campaigning. In informal discussions, the cadres would see fielding an 'external' candidate/ladder as part of the strategy. Beyond caste and economic compulsions, the

possibility of Dalit candidate winning on non-reserved seats remains dismal. For missionaries it is also difficult to contest elections as the costs of campaigning are generally out of their reach. The effort of the cadre was to identify a candidate who was neither a Maratha nor a Vanjari and who would be willing to spend money for the campaign and ideally was inclined toward Bahujan ideology.

Experienced workers reiterated that Maratha candidates were least preferred as they fail to secure Maratha votes for BSP. A look at the caste profile of candidates who contested elections on BSP ticket in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections reveals that Marathas were the least preferred caste. Since the prime competition was between the Marathas (NCP) and the Vanjaris (BJP) in Beed, BSP cadres tried to become a powerful third player by not focussing on these two castes.

While the discussions held to discuss the candidate pointed towards a democratic practice or seeking opinion of the workers who were lower down the hierarchy, the actual identification of candidate did not go as per their wishes. A Maratha candidate was finally identified to contest elections by one of the district leaders (who had moved from Congress to BSP in 2004 and joined BJP after Lok Sabha elections) upsetting the committed cadres. This was more so as this candidate was supposedly 'planted' by the BJP in the hope that he would split the Maratha votes. The cadres did not anticipate a win in Beed, though they were hopeful of Mayawati emerging as prime minister and of increasing vote percentage of BSP in Beed. All the high hopes of the cadre were affected with the finalising of this candidate who had neither a social base nor commitment to Bahujan ideology. BSP workers shared their unease and dissatisfaction over the choice of candidate.

The candidate has a past in *sangh* and Congress, he is characterless. (Field notes: 4 April 2009)

Look at the Rajasthan example; all the six elected MLA's (of BSP) have joined Congress. The missionary and the mission are important for the movement. We did not agree with the candidate identified by the district head who is influenced by Congress culture. We opposed the candidate, some of us threatened to leave but they (state leadership) did not care. Mayawati seems to prefer *siddi* to missionaries, unlike Kanshiram who gave more importance to missionaries. (Field notes: 8 April 2009)

Excessive use of ladders can backfire as they leave the BSP at their convenience adversely affecting the morale of committed cadres who also cherish ambitions of contesting elections. The identified candidate was

neither interested nor involved in campaigning for votes after securing the candidature. Nor did he provide the promised money for campaigning. The district level head of BSP who had identified the candidate was also involved in swindling some money meant for campaigning. This led to internal conflict within BSP as the committed workers roughed him up. This concerned leader had moved to the BJP later.

### ***Campaigning and Results***

The cadres, however, returned to campaigning and utilised the limited resources made available by the candidate to reach out to the villages. Separate booklets for upper caste, SC/ST and OBC in Hindi and for Muslims in Hindi and Urdu were released from Lucknow. The cadres who particularly focussed on reaching Dalits distributed these. The villages that had not polled a single vote for BSP in the past returned with single digit votes for BSP, most of these were Dalit votes. BSP polled a total of 25,284 votes, which was its highest in Beed Lok Sabha elections. This was much lower than other districts in Marathwada where BSP had done much better compared to the past Lok Sabha elections. In the neighbouring Hingoli, the candidate from Laman caste with a background in Bahujan politics had polled 111,357 and the Muslim candidate in Nanded had polled 84,743. Economically strong candidates with clean political image who also belonged to a numerical caste (other than Maratha), thus, were able to make a dent in expanding votes for BSP.

In Beed, however, there were various factors that contributed to BSP's unimpressive performance. Firstly, it was the candidate, who besides not having a clean political image was also from the 'wrong' caste. Further BSP's claim of being 'Bahujan' party was not put into practice by giving ticket to a '*savarna*' [Marathas are increasingly not considered part of Bahujans]. Secondly, the Dalit workers of BJP mobilised opinion and emotions against the NCP candidate by recalling the instances of Adaskar's father's involvement in humiliating Ambedkar (symbols) and Dalits during the *Namantar* conflict and Munde's support for the *Namantar* movement. This worked well in mobilising votes for Munde as a 'Bahujan' candidate. Munde too resorted to 'Bahujan' rhetoric and claimed to be a Bahujan leader as against the non-inclusive Maratha-NCP. Further, Munde did not allow Narendra Modi (Hindutva voice of BJP) to campaign in Beed, thus, attracting some Muslims towards BJP. Thirdly, the use of money affected performance of BSP as Dalit men in

various villages voted for money and liquor supplied by both the dominant parties.

Phule Pimpalgaon (Majalgaon) village has a strong presence of BSP (and Dalits) had polled 171 (17 per cent in the village) votes;<sup>8</sup> the local cadres in the village were, however, disappointed as some Dalits here had voted in favour of BJP for money.

In the Vidhan Sabha elections that followed the cadres played a greater role in identifying candidates. The Vidhan Sabha elections were, however, too competitive in terms of resource requirements for BSP to carve any niche. Local issues of indigenous Marathi versus north Indians were a counter force that gained much political importance and led to further splitting of Dalit votes in western region. In Marathwada, candidates identified by BSP were no matches for the Maratha powerhouses of NCP under pressures of which even the BJP performed dismally in Beed. The only seat of hope in Beed was Georai, as a Muslim candidate with clean political image who had (economic) resources was identified to contest.

## **Non-Dalit Support and the Challenge of *Lagao Lejao* (Invest and Reap)**

The success of BSP depends on non-Dalit support and BSP has increasingly grown into a catch all party under Dalit leadership (Jaffrelot 2006). While BSP managed to instil self-belief within Dalits about the possibility of a Dalit party with Bahujan ideology (Phule-Ambedkarite) coming to power on its own, mobilising non-Dalit support remained a difficult task. The ideological dimensions remained unattractive to most non-Dalits even if they were emphasised by non-Dalits in BSP.

The cadres worked towards mobilising non-Dalit support through formation of *bhaichara* committees and by explaining ideological basis of BSP. Such ideological groundings that revolved around undoing historical humiliation and exclusion (social, economic and political) were, however, not always attractive for non-Dalits. Syed Irshad Ali, a well-educated Muslim in his sixties, fluent in English was invited to attend one of these meetings. In our informal conversation, he shared that this

<sup>8</sup>The booth-wise voting results were published in all major newspapers and the data from Phule Pimpalgaon is from the newspaper *Sakal*, Aurangabad edition dated 20 May 2009.

‘emotional’ approach does not work (Field notes: 24 February 2009). However, some Non-Dalits too had joined BSP in Beed in the post-2007 mobilisation that included Muslims, Brahmans and Marathas. The lure of money and power from dominant parties on the other hand worked in purging these new non-Dalit supporters from BSP.

The case of Safdar Khan helps further elaborate on the tension between principled politics and the substantive politics where caste and money matter. Khan joined BSP after its victory in 2007 and rose in party organisation to occupy the post of District Vice President in Beed. He was most liked by the committed cadre for his clean image and for running an organisation that provided charity for poor Muslims. Khan would emphasise in his speeches that BSP was ‘80 per cent movement and 20 per cent politics’ and that is what had attracted him to the party. ‘I have been a social worker; I liked *vichar* (ideology) of the party. I am also economically well-off [*Arthik Paristhiti Bari Aahe*] so I thought I should join them’ (Field notes: 19 December 2008). Khan owned two SUV cars which were plunged into campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections. Some workers of BSP were hoping for Khan to contest the Lok Sabha elections. While the Lok Sabha seat was given to a Maratha, Khan was confirmed candidate for Georai Vidhan Sabha seat much before the elections were announced.

Khan who was a resident of Georai Town was most critical of the political might of the Marathas in Georai Taluka, particularly the two Pandit<sup>9</sup> (surname) families who controlled both BJP and NCP. He along with the support of workers from BSP had protested on various occasions against the illegal sand mining in Godavari river that the NCP MLA of Georai, Badamrao Pandit was involved in.

These people have filled their own pockets so far, the best example is the Pandits in Georai, they have kept power in the family for so many years by controlling both Congress and BJP, they smuggle sand from Godavari and demand money from poor for sanctioning *gharkul* (housing scheme), or providing kerosene. They just want to earn money and nothing else. They feel that they were born to rule. (Field notes: 22 February 2009)

<sup>9</sup>For the Georai Vidhan Sabha seat two Maratha leaders— Badamrao Pandit (NCP) and Amarsingh Pandit (BJP) have been key contenders. The competition is fierce amongst these leaders, so much that Badamrao had hit Amarsingh on a TV discussion, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk6nIGh-BES> (accessed on 13 January 2011). Amarsingh, however, joined NCP in March 2012 and was made Member of Legislative Council in July 2012.

Some of these protests were reported in local newspapers, thus resulting in recognition for Khan locally. Khan also gave a speech at a rally to protest violence against Dalit girls in Pindi. The Dalit workers of Georai had mobilised noticeable support for BSP in Beed. In the Lok Sabha elections, Georai polling booths had polled a total of 4,446 votes. Khan's contesting on BSP ticket for the Vidhan Sabha elections led to distress for the NCP MLA as the competition with BJP MLA was a very close one and even a smallest margin mattered. Khan's clean political image and his being a Muslim made the matter worse as it meant transfer of some Muslim votes in favour of BSP. Dalit cadre in Georai laboured intensely to mobilise support for BSP and Khan locally which made Georai a seat of hope not for win but for rocking the chances of NCP and the local MLA as both are known for their anti-Dalit stance.

Dalit workers were, however, in for a shock as Khan withdrew his nomination at the last moment and joined the NCP MLA who he had been protesting against. The cadres of BSP had mistaken Khan as someone who was attracted to BSP's ideology. Khan was lured by Badamrao Pandit to join NCP, which assured Badamrao's win in the election of Georai Vidhan Sabha with a meagre margin of 2,347 votes. Cadres of BSP generally kept an eye on candidates till the last date of nomination withdrawal but Khan was not amongst the doubted ones. Khan's contesting elections would have turned the tide against the dominant Pandit family of Georai and established Khan and BSP as an alternative third force in politics of Georai Vidhan Sabha. Dalit workers from Georai informed me in 2010 that Khan had bagged contracts for public works from the NCP MLA. Khan changed his mobile number after he withdrew from BSP and has remained inaccessible for me and other BSP workers since.

The withdrawal of Khan and the marginal performance of BSP may point to the failure of autonomous Dalit claims if evaluated in an instrumentalist sense. The BSP, however, has consolidated and sustained assertive Dalit ideology in Maharashtra particularly Marathwada and Vidharbha despite various odds. The structure of patronage politics and bipolar competition between the Marathas and Vanjaris provides little space for Dalits to carve out a space for separate identity and ideology. The growth of BSP in UP and the hard work of cadre in Marathwada have contributed in taking BSP as a political opportunity and as an ideology beyond Dalits. Patronage politics, however, remains the mainstream political culture that best merges and sustains through numerical advantage of Marathas. Dalit cadre of BSP, despite failures continued to remain

hopeful of change, they continue to spend from their pockets to attend meetings and rallies as far as Lucknow even after their defeat in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections.

BSP did not win a single seat in Lok Sabha elections of Maharashtra though its vote percentage increased sharply in Vidarbha and Marathwada. The tall hope of Mayawati becoming prime minister was faced with BSP not winning a single seat in Maharashtra and performance below expectation in UP; this lowered the morale of both the workers and supporters of BSP. The committed cadre, however, continued to talk of winning possibilities in the future and they would return to cadre narrative—‘BSP is a movement and not a political party’, so a loss did not affect them. While the case of BSP presents continued practice of autonomous Dalit politics in electoral arena, the case of MHA points to opportunistic alliance with NCP that too did not yield to Dalits or MHA leaders the desired benefit.

## MHA in Electoral Politics: Alliances and Exclusions

I have discussed in Chapter Two, the intersections between institutional and extra-institutional mobilisation of MHA. The workers of MHA see the participation in party politics as a necessity of activism and most of them actively participate in/or contest panchayat elections. The reasons for participation in electoral politics echo those of other Dalit movements.

P: It is true that *samaj karan* (social work) helps change the *samaj*, but even *rajkaran* (politics) can help in changing *samaj*. Look at Mayawati for instance [ ... ] Mayawati feels that grassroots work does not change policy; we have to control the place where policy is made. We should have people of our *vichar* there. Therefore, politics is important in changing the *samaj*. (Focus group discussion: 10 December 2008)

The principled reasoning of MHA activists reiterates belief in democratic processes, however, the actual practice of elections is rooted in political competition where the dominant political players use power of caste, money and muscle variedly. MHA functions from its marginal location in contesting and at times replicating these substantive practices in electoral processes. MHA despite its temporal alliance with the dominant parties has also sustained its independent identity by not totally toeing the line of BJP or NCP.

### *Mapping MHA and Awad's Political Choices*

Awad's active participation in party politics began through BSP; he was one of the state vice presidents of BSP in the late 1990s and had contested the Lok Sabha elections from Beed constituency in 1998 polling 15,666 votes. The BJP candidate who won the seat polled 300,307 votes and the NCP candidate who was the runner up polled 294,204. Some non-Maratha dissidents within NCP had covertly extended support to Awad. The NCP Maratha candidate lost the seat because of Awad contesting the elections as he managed to swing a large number of Dalit votes in favour of BSP. Awad considered contesting election for BSP as a sacrifice (*bali*) to 'liberate' the Dalit votes.

Kanshiram told me you should contest elections; you should be a victim for the community. No one had such a strong campaigning as ours. There was an elephant and photograph of Babasaheb used in the campaign. We used to go in the village and say, 'The Patils from their forts (*Gadivarchya Wadyawarche Patla*) have oppressed us. They have not allowed our vote to be free (*mukt*). I am contesting elections to free vote of Manguda and Maharuda'.<sup>10</sup> (Interview: 24 August 2008)

Though Awad entered politics in an assertive mode seeking to liberate Dalit votes from fear and to secure power for Dalits (Bahujans), MHA's political strategies have been most fluid for the last ten years since Awad moved out of BSP. Awad attributed his departure from BSP primarily to his political involvement affecting the funding RDC (and MHA) was receiving from INGOs. This did not bring Awad's political ambitions to an end which were intrinsically linked to his social activism. BMP, a political party was formed in 2000. Dadasaheb Kshirsagar, another important leader from Mang caste was made the national president of BMP. Awad did not hold any position in the party but remained a key force behind the BMP. Awad maintained BMP as an effort to unite non-Mahars, particularly Mangs who were not as politicised as Mahars. The nomenclature and ideology was inspired by the Indian Labour Party formed by Ambedkar (Interview: 2 October 2008).

BMP came to be active locally more as a Mang social movement than a political party with boards/*shakahas* coming up at village level, at times painted on the reverse of the existing boards of MHA. Growth

<sup>10</sup>Manguda and Maharuda refer to Mang and Mahar localities which are traditionally outside the main village where Maratha or castes above Dalit reside.



of BMP and Awad did not go well with Jaydutt Kshirsagar who was also state tourism minister. BMP was seen as a threat to 'un-contested' Mang support of NCP as Mangs were not an organised political force in Beed before the growth of BMP. Kshirsagar attempted to check the growth of BMP by strengthening the base of Dhobale, another senior Mang leader of NCP in Beed against Awad and BMP/MHA. Dhobale was made the guardian minister (*palak mantri*) of Beed during this period. This brought MHA in direct conflict with Dhobale,<sup>11</sup> Kshirsagar and NCP locally forcing BMP to form an alliance with BJP.

I had no alternative. I organised Annabhau *jayanti* in Majalgaon and invited Gopinath Munde. Munde realised our strength in that meeting and other meetings that followed and assured me the Member of Legislative Council (MLC) seat. I had not allied with BJP because of any political philosophy; I wanted to straighten Dhobale and Kshirsagar. (Interview: 8 June 2009)

Here, Awad explains the departure from his autonomous Dalit identity to an alliance with BJP as not ideologically-driven but driven by strategy and compulsions. What it also reflects is the challenges MHA met with due to organising and politicising Mangs. Awad, thus, came in conflict with a Mang leader co-opted to serve the interest of NCP/Marathas.

While Dhobale was contesting from Osmanabad District for the Lok Sabha in 2004, MHA extended support to BSP candidate and also hosted an independent Mang candidate from BMP causing Dhobale's defeat. Following this, Awad was attacked by some local followers of Dhobale with swords in Majalgaon causing some grave injuries. In the 2004 assembly elections that followed, MHA mobilised votes against Kshirsagar in favour of BJP (BSP polled 2,636 votes which also contributed in dividing traditional Congress votes) causing Kshirsagar's defeat by

<sup>11</sup>Dhobale regularly issues pro-Maratha statements following cases of caste violence against Dalits. He had visited Pindi village and maintained that Pindi incident was not a case of caste atrocity. In January 2012, there was another incident of caste violence in Mulgaon village of Satara district. Marathas here had stripped and beaten a Mang woman as her son had eloped with his Maratha girlfriend. Dhobale justified the 'outburst' of Maratha family as 'natural' (DNA Correspondent 2012). Similarly, in August 2012, he called Dalit protests against cases of rape against Dalit women as waste of time, see [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-28/nagpur/33449461\\_1\\_dalit-women-mob-fury-street-protests](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-28/nagpur/33449461_1_dalit-women-mob-fury-street-protests) (accessed on 30 August 2012).

a margin of 3,377 votes. Kshirsagar had anticipated his defeat and had approached Awad for support which Awad had declined (Field notes: 2 October 2008). This was a grave loss for Kshirsagar who was a minister in the earlier NCP-Congress government that retained power in the assembly elections of 2004. This victory of NCP, however, meant little for Kshirsagar as he had lost the assembly elections and the possibility of securing a ministerial berth. The MHA (along with other Dalit parties) managed to cause the defeat of Kshirsagar and Dhobale, two powerful leaders of NCP despite being small political players. While this points to a temporal success of MHA as a marginal player in talking back against the suppression of NCP what has followed is an interesting dichotomy of co-option of Awad in NCP and increased animosity between Dhobale and Awad (both Mangs within NCP).

### ***Making of Awad as ‘Mang’ Leader and Dhobale as Permanent Enemy***

BMP did raise hopes amongst the Mangs who had mobilised to form an independent political party. An alliance with and in support of BJP, however, had cost BMP its autonomy and assertive status. The support was not valued by BJP, which had chosen to ignore Awad and BMP after the elections of 2004. The boards of BMP have turned rusty now but MHA (as non-political) continued to remain active. BMP is almost dormant now. Its national president Dadasaheb Kshirasagar works as an activist of MHA in some districts of Vidarbha on the issues of *gaairan* and caste atrocities without any NGO project support. As part of celebration of fifty years of Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, Dadasaheb too converted to Buddhism with Eknath Awad in 2006 (Interview, Dadasaheb: 23 February 2009).

MHA focussed its energy on the *gaairan* issue more intensely since 2004 following the grant from Intermon-Oxfam. Large-scale mobilisation of *gaairan* claimants attracted attention of NCP, particularly Sharad Pawar who attended some of MHA’s rallies of *gaairan* occupants. This brought Awad in close contact with the supreme leadership of NCP and the local NCP leaders too had to work with Awad under compulsion. Kshirsagar too realised the strategic importance of being in Awad’s good books and Awad on the other hand wanted to sever his ties with BJP. Awad’s wife, Gayabai Awad, thus, contested on a NCP ticket during the Zilla Parishad elections on a reserved seat in 2007.

BJP never gave me any MLC nor did they come around when I was attacked. After some time, I had to sever the ties with BJP and that was also a reason for making my wife contest for Zilla Parishad on NCP ticket. It was Kshirsagar my opponent who got me the ticket [laughs] despite us causing his defeat. (Interview: 8 June 2009)

Gayabai Awad<sup>12</sup> won the Zilla Parishad seat under stiff competition, which was primarily due to the Maratha angst against Eknath Awad for his activism on caste atrocities and some of the local RPI [Mahar] groups too mobilised against Gayabai. Zilla Parishad elections were also a competition between two local Marathas one from BJP and the other from NCP. Local elections such as Zilla Parishad, panchayat samiti and *gram panchayat* involve stiff competition amongst the established political elites which translates into heavy spending of money. The Zilla Parishad election win had cost Awad over ₹10 lakh; with this win MHA had severed its ties completely with BJP.

Awad's rising clout in NCP became a matter of concern for Dhobale who is the Dalit face of NCP. While Kshirsagar has solved his differences by offering Awad the Zilla Parishad ticket, the rivalry between Dhobale and Awad has continued. The MHA's show of strength through *gaairan* mobilisation also raised chances of Awad being made a Member of Legislative Council (MLC) in 2008 by the ruling NCP, this was opposed by the Mang leaders of NCP under Dhobale. Awad too has resorted to identity politics to deal with the damage Dhobale was inflicting. It was alleged by MHA based on documentary evidence that Dhobale was a Holar (numerically less prominent subcaste within Mangs and lower than Mang *assal* [real]) and not a Mang as Dhobale claimed.<sup>13</sup> Though MHA's local practice is Mang-oriented, it is not explicitly Mang centered and issues pertaining to Dalits as whole and other minor castes are actively taken up. Awad's engagement in party politics, however, has also turned him into a Mang leader representing Mang interests.

<sup>12</sup>Eknath Awad's wife Gayabai Awad and their son Milind Awad are involved in MHA but neither is seen as charismatic leaders and they do not enjoy the support of Dalits such as Awad. Milind is a PhD in English from JNU and is a lecturer at a college in Delhi University. Milind's charisma is in the making and activists refer to him as *nana* with respect, though a few activists within the MHA were critical of Milind being seen as the second-line leader.

<sup>13</sup>Awad shared the dilemma in resorting to this tactic and was wary that it may backfire. Luckily, Dhobale turned reactionary and insisted that he was a Mang and not Holar.

In 2009 as the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections closed in, Awad organised meetings with 'Mangs' at their centre to counter Dhobale's influence in NCP and amongst Mangs. These meetings were meant to discuss the report produced by a government appointed Lahuji Salave Commission on the socio-economic status of Mangs and the recommendations. The commission was set up by Congress-NCP government on the eve of the assembly elections of 2004 to study the socio-economic condition of Mangs and a report was prepared in 2008. One of the important recommendations of the commission's final report was separate reservations for Mangs within the SC category. MHA organised meetings and discussions around this report despite Awad not being an aggressive proponent of separate reservations for Mangs.

Awad besides challenging Dhobale's claim of being a Mang leader was also hoping to secure a ticket from NCP for forthcoming Vidhan Sabha elections; thus part of his Mang mobilisation was influenced by his political ambitions. Awad's support to NCP, however, was belittled and Awad's clout was limited to Zilla Parishad and his Mang identity. Following are details of MHA's support to NCP and its limited utility for MHA.

### ***The Support for NCP***

MHA workers campaigning for NCP in Dharur were waiting for the personal assistant of the local NCP MLA, who was to come and pay money to this group (us) so that we could leave for the day's campaigning. As we sat on the tar road facing the temporary NCP jan-sampark (people contact) office, Govardhan Lokhande, an old man from Mang caste who generally moves around with his wife singing Annabhau Sathe's *povada's* for a living in Dharur came closer performing and asking for money. He first went to a group sitting on our left who ignored him and laughed him away. He sang, 'Have you heard the story of sixteenth century about Shivaji?' The group ignored him and one of them told him, 'Go inside the office, money is being distributed there'. Govardhan then walked towards us and stood on our right looking towards the office. 'Who is giving money?' he asked one of our accomplices. A Mang youth amongst us replied in humour, 'The cashier is not here yet'. 'How much is he giving?' asked Govardhan. 'Depends on how many votes you have', replied the youth.

Govardhan waited for a while looking around through his thick glasses and then commented, 'Mata Viknaryana Mi Jhat Manat Nahin (those

who sell their votes I consider them worse than my pubic hair), Aaj Mata Vikata, Udaya Bayaka Vikal (you sell your votes today, tomorrow you will sell your wives). [Paused for some time] Looking at us he added, '*Tumhala 10,000 Dile Tar Bayaka Vikal Tumhi* (if they give you Rs 10,000 you will sell your wife). Why take money and also their bulli (penis) in your ass? [ ... ] It then gets stuck like a dog's penis in your ass. You will not be able to remove it then. Waited for some more time and continued, 'Why don't you vote for Mayawati? *Desh Bouddhamai Karayla Nighali Aahe Na Ti* (she is hoping to make the country Buddhist, isn't it?)'. (Field notes: 22 April 2009)

Govardhan, though a non-entity in local Dalit politics, was critical of the lack of autonomous politics amongst Dalits. He criticised not just voting for money and Dalit activists acting as brokers but also the idea of dependency on dominant parties that necessarily use Dalit votes to oppress (for him equal to rape) or trespass Dalit freedoms. Awad and other workers of MHA too acknowledged in various informal conversations that NCP was more anti-Dalit due to Maratha dominance as compared to BJP, as those Marathas involved in committing atrocities against Dalits were mostly bailed out through networks of NCP. The call of Mangs for Mangs and MHA's evoking of Dhobale's Holar identity went against its ideological groundings and anti-caste commitments, so did their support for NCP. The MHA, however, supported NCP in the hope of a favourable decision on the issue of *gaairan* and also the hope of Awad securing either an MLA or MLC seat. Awad's objective of securing of MLA or political power can be termed as a personal political ambition at the cost of Dalit autonomy, however, in the political geography of Marathwada assertive Dalits in general and Mangs in particular are mostly with limited freedom within NCP.

In the general elections of 2009, MHA workers in Beed participated in campaigning for NCP candidate Ramesh Adaskar. Some of Awad's subordinates were involved giving speeches at NCP gatherings.<sup>14</sup> Awad attended some of these meetings and was on the stage but did not give a speech in these meetings. Besides a jeep to travel and diesel cost, the local leader of NCP paid the MHA workers ₹1,000 a day. During the Parliamentary elections, the amount of money spent by BJP was much higher than NCP, informal estimates reached ₹100 crore. Elections

<sup>14</sup>This was the case only in Beed whereas workers in other districts followed parties that suited their local interests. In Hingoli and Nanded, MHA workers had lobbied for BSP.

are also an event for Dalit brokers/leaders to earn some money besides consolidating their base amongst Dalits through campaigning. Sadashiv, a senior worker of MHA was unhappy with NCP for not providing him with money and a jeep for campaigning. He held Maratha arrogance as the reason for NCP ignoring MHA.

When a BSP worker asked Sadashiv why he was not campaigning. Sadashiv looked around to make sure there was no Maratha and replied, '*Kai Marathyana Bokandivar Basvun Ghyayacha Kai?* (Should we make the Marathas sit on our ass?) [ ... ] I Adaskar's father was against Dalits [ ... ] It was because of *Gairan* that *jija* (Awad) was supporting NCP [ ... ] I think that Munde is secular [in English], even Muslims are canvassing for him. They say that Munde is a nice man. After all he is from a minority. (Field notes: 12 April 2009)

Workers committed to Awad utilised the opportunity (funds) during elections to reach amongst Mangs and convince them of the need to follow Awad. Bogalwadi was one village the workers visited; the dominance of Vanjaris is absolute. The Mangs constitute around 100 households whereas the Vanjari number is around 600. The Vanjari leaders were divided here between NCP and BJP for local panchayat elections but were united in supporting Munde for the Lok Sabha elections. Most Mang families here are sugarcane migrant workers. When we visited the village in the afternoon, a day before the elections, most Mang men were drunk on the liquor provided by BJP. After canvassing with some youths who were not drunk, as we started leaving the village an old drunk man who could barely stand on his feet came towards the jeep and started shouting, '*Rashtrawadi* (NCP) will not get a single vote, we will not give a single vote to *Rasthrawadi*' (Field notes: 22 April 2009). The patronage of Vanjaris over Mangs in this village coupled with money and liquor provided during elections were added incentives for Mangs to vote for BJP. MHA's efforts to mobilise support of Mangs for MHA (and NCP) did not work well when faced with the money and liquor power.

Awad despite intense lobbying failed to gain an MLA ticket from NCP. Awad's name temporarily did the rounds for the reserved seat in Badnapur reserved constituency; however, a local dominant Maratha leader of NCP opposed this as Awad was involved in filing 'atrocities' cases against some Marathas there as well. It was Dhobale who struck this possibility of Badnapur seat totally and in a press conference commented sarcastically on Awad's political ambitions, 'Social workers go-

ing mad over joining politics' (Vartahar 2009). The assembly ticket was given to a Mang follower of Dhobale. The promise of making Awad a MLC or of regularising encroached *gaairan* lands of Dalits remained unfulfilled. The only benefit that came out of supporting NCP was Gayabai Awad's elevation as Chairman of Social Welfare in Beed Zilla Parishad.<sup>15</sup> Awad's assertive political past and present does not fit well with the dominant caste needs. Awad, thus, remained at the margins of NCP.

## **Dominant Caste Choices of Dalit Politicians and Why Dalit Autonomy Matters?**

Dalit participation in electoral politics does not fit into analyses that emphasise the 'sacredness' of elections and democracy for the marginalised and poor (Banerjee 2008). Ambedkar's efforts of constructing autonomous Dalit politics through purging them from the mainstream nationalist thinking was also an attempt to challenge the sacredness of politics pursued by elite Hindus. The idea, therefore, of symbolic equality for one day at the polling booth was considered as 'madness' by Ambedkar: he predicted that the SCs elected under joint electorates would end up being slaves of Hindus (Interview, Ambedkar: broadcast on BBC, 31st December 1955).

### ***Dalit Autonomy and Dadpan [Fear]***

The workers of BSP utilised their limited resources in mobilising Dalit votes and opinion in favour of BSP. By voting for BSP, Dalit supporters, however, antagonise dominants and risk their welfare entitlements in the villages as the local state bodies are controlled by either Marathas or Vanjaris. Such control is deep rooted and encompasses panchayats, cooperatives and all aspects associated with welfare and other state entitlements for the poor. Supporting a party which has limited chances of victory and is led by an autonomous Dalit identity and ideology, thus, also results in Dalits risking their welfare entitlements.

<sup>15</sup>Gayabai Awad contested and won the Zilla Parishad elections of 2012. Activists estimated Awad's election expenditure to be around ₹16 lakh. Gayabai Awad was, however, made Chairman of the lesser valued division of women and child development.

In Chapter Three, I have discussed the violence that Dalits face after turning assertive in public sphere. Electoral politics should ideally neutralise the violent practices of caste as voting is carried out through secret ballot boxes. The results of elections are, however, made available according to voting booths and also published in some local newspapers. It is, thus, not very difficult to make out who may have voted for whom.

K, one of the Mang female supporters of BSP who was sure that BSP will not win in Maharashtra explained the specificity of fear (*dadpan*) that Dalits voting for BSP have to face, the fear of violence and exclusion from state entitlements meant for the poor, particularly, the Dalits.

K: BSP will not come to power in Maharashtra, if BSP comes to power in Maharashtra the whole world will shake. It will be good if she (Mayawati) comes to power but it is not easy. It is a difficult situation for our people, they are under *dadpan*.

S: *Dadpan*?

K: They cannot go with BSP; what if they vote and BSP does not come to power? No one will take us close later; they will say get lost you voted for elephant [BSP symbol]. Is this not *dadpan*? That is why I told you I will not tell you who I vote for and you should not ask me who I am voting for. (Interview: 5 March 2009)

Dalit voting, if not in favour of dominant caste choices could also attract violence. This is a particular cause of fear for Dalits who are dependent on dominant castes for their daily survival. K further emphasised that voting for money offered by the dominant castes and parties did not ensure Dalits access to state entitlements either. She was particularly referring to *sarkari kaam* (means government related jobs, schemes of DRDA, Gharkul, corporation loans and various other state provisions).

[I]f we take their money we become their slaves, why will they do your *kaam*? He (elected representative) too will ask for money later. You have not voted for free why will you get the facilities for free? They will say, you took money, liquor and mutton for voting, now get lost. (Interview: 5 March 2009)

### ***Dominant Caste Choices of Dalit Candidates***

The cultural critique that Dalit movements bring to party politics does not go well with the dominant castes that prefer to look for Dalit candidates who suit their interests and ideology. Ghule, a Maratha, shared



proverbs used amongst the non-Dalits particularly Marathas that made explicit the choices of Marathas for SC reserved seats. *Mahara Peksha Mang Bara Ani Manga Peksha Chambar Bara* (A Mang is better than a Mahar and a Chambar better than Mang), the other one was more specific, '*Jai Bhim Peksha Ram Ram Bara*' (Ram Ram is better than Jai Bhim) (Field notes: 22 April 2009).

Sachin in his early twenties had attended the Charmakar rallies of BSP and campaigned passionately for Mayawati and BSP, he was however not fully convinced about BSP's utility in Maharashtra for Charmakars. After the disappointing performance of BSP in Maharashtra, he discussed his reservations with Banage.

Sachin: A lot of Charmakars benefited when Babanrao Gholap was the social welfare minister. Currently too there are lot of Charmakars who are elected to Lok Sabha [ ... ] Mayawati says, '*Jiski Jitani Sankhya Bhari, Uski Utani Bhagidari*' (according to your numbers you get your share), if this is to happen then Charmakars are very few in number, they will not get anything here.

Banage: Those elected Charmakars are all *gulams* (slaves), they will make them ministers but they will have no powers (Field notes; 6 June 2009)

While Banage insisted the need for rejecting the patronising control of Congress and BJP over Dalits and Charmakars, Mang workers of MHA try to make most of the Maratha antagonism against Mahars in local politics. However, assertive Dalits or 'Dalit' agenda and ideology are hardly accommodated in the mainstream politics. When I returned to Beed in January 2010, Awad was critical of party politics and termed politicians as terrorists who were lawmakers. Awad's no-compromise stance on caste atrocities and his anti-caste conversions to Buddhism continues to obstruct his success in party politics.

When a Mahar Dalit leader tries to make his independent mark in politics, Mangs are preferred because Mahars have revolted against Hindu culture, not totally but they have tried. And this has not been liked by this (Hindu) culture. Dalits who follow the traditional leadership or behave like slaves succeed. I am yet to see anyone other than Kanshiram and later Mayawati who have raised Dalit issues independently in Parliament. What they have achieved is a matter of debate but they present their points assertively and have also managed to win elections. Such leaders are exceptions. (Interview: 8 June 2009)

The choice of Chambars in Maharashtra does seem overwhelming given their minuscule population in Maharashtra as compared to Mangs and Mahars. Of the thirty-three SC MLAs elected in 2009 legislative assembly elections, twelve are Chambars, eleven are Mahars and only three are Mangs and the rest come from other numerically less prominent castes. Chambars were also the most preferred locally in the Zilla Parishad, panchayat samiti and *gram panchayat* elections.

In Sadola village of Majalgaon Taluka where the post of sarpanch was reserved for SCs, the Marathas unanimously decided to shun the elections of *gram panchayat* and identified a Chambar who would be the 'unopposed' sarpanch. The Marathas also announced the village decision to 'blacken the face' of anyone who filed nominations to contest the elections. Radhabai, one of the woman workers of MHA decided to file nominations.

I was wondering why they talk of *bin virodh* (selection without election/opposition) when the post of sarpanch is reserved for us [ ... ] It was ward number two that was reserved which had 200 Dalit votes (Mang and Mahar) [ ... ] Why would they blacken our face if we contested? I did not agree. (Focus Group: 4 March 2009)

Radhabai's decision to contest panchayat elections resulted in the united Marathas splitting in two groups and competing within themselves. Both the groups, however, remained firm on the choice of Chambar candidates as their representatives for the reserved sarpanch post. It is, however, not a liking for Chambar community that Marathas have, clarified another worker for MHA.

It is not about Mang, Mahar or Chambar. They do not need anyone who will overtake [meant cross or question] the village [Marathas/Vanjaris] here. (Focus Group: 4 March 2009)

The possibility of Dalit freedom or Dalits as equals in village polity goes against established Maratha authority. Some Dalits workers of MHA who resort to assertive politics locally face violence/threats of violence and humiliation. Tukaram, another worker of MHA, was elected as a ward member of panchayat in Umri village of Majalgaon Taluka. Tukaram is postgraduate and also works in one of the projects of RDC. The seat of sarpanch was reserved for OBC in Umri and one of the large landowning [Tukaram called him zamindar] Marathas here incurred all the election expenses for the panel of candidates which included Tukaram.

This Maratha was also a close confidante of Prakash Solanke<sup>16</sup> (MLA of NCP). This Maratha was, however, angered when Dalit workers of MHA had poked fun at god Hanuman in this village in one of their programmes, as Dalits are not allowed to enter the Hanuman temple in this village. Tukaram too had criticised NCP government for their faulty educational policies that led to low-quality education for the poor. The Maratha zamindar warned Tukaram not just against his political trespassing but also his ‘Western’ dressing.

‘Your *karyakartas* spoke against Hanuman and you tuck your shirt in and go around the village. You should not tuck your shirt in the village and once you enter the village you should remove your tucked shirt. You encroached upon the *gaairan*, did we say anything? No, then why should you speak against our gods and religion? You think you are the president (of India) after tucking your shirt in?’ (Interview, Tukaram: 5 December 2008)

The Maratha zamindars intolerance encompassed not just cultural assertion of Tukaram but also his Western dressing—which he assumed made Tukaram feel like ‘president’. The attitude of tolerance that goes with political democracy does not come out of lack of political power, suggests Kaviraj (2010: 86). Preference for modern political power as compared to traditional rule of Patil is, thus, essential for Dalits like Tukaram to experience political equality. Tukaram, though scared, did not stop tucking his shirt while in village. He, however, had toned down his cultural activism in the village and blamed other Dalits in the village for not being as aware and assertive. The zamindar had, thus, managed to partially tame Tukaram’s political and cultural assertion.

The problem of democracy is deep rooted in India as the rural elite has responded to democracy through a complex strategic mix that sustains their paternalistic claim to authority (Kaviraj 2010: 88). The marketisation of basic services and entitlements has become part of India’s patronage based democracy; politicians have developed a stake, therefore, not in democracy but in patronage (Chandra 2004). Decentralisation and downsizing of India’s dominant state are seen as possible ways of changing democracy in India (Chandra 2004). However, Dalit exclusion from full political citizenship in villages of Marathwada is a product of the

<sup>16</sup>Prakash Solanke is a Maratha leader with thick political patronage in Majalgaon. He was previously elected MLA as an independent candidate, later on as a BJP candidate and is presently a state minister from NCP.

dominant caste control over fragmented state institutions and society. The reliance of Dalit politics on democratic processes makes state and electoral politics central to their efforts of liberation and simultaneously renders them susceptible to political exclusion.

## Electoral as Inevitable, Non-party as Central

The case of BSP and MHA suggests that autonomous Dalit politics and their aggregation efforts are resented both by the dominant political formations and by Dalits within these formations. Nor do Dalit attempts to align with dominant parties result in dignified inclusion. Awad, despite being amongst the key leaders in Marathwada who have worked on the issue of *gaairan*, Dalit rights and his anti-caste move of symbolic conversions to Buddhism, is turned into a 'leader of Mangs' in NCP. The patronage-based party politics in Marathwada casts Maratha leaders as 'secular' political representatives and denies Dalits the right to represent not just non-Dalits but Dalits themselves. The representation of Dalits in NCP and BJP results from constitutional obligations in party politics and not from concerns for Dalits. Dalit representation there is decided to suit and sustain dominant caste patronage and interests. Awad's travel from BSP to BJP and NCP reveals the compulsions of Dalit in party politics and also Awad's strategic opportunism. The MHA too has resorted to a conservative interpretation of Mang identity against Mang political rivals in electoral competition. Such active politics of 'presence' in electoral politics does not have a broad transformative agenda (Hasan 2006). However, the numerical strength and other forms of capital go against Dalit interests, ideology and their cunning politics. The MHA's electoral participation unravels the limited benefits of aligning with dominant parties and the curtailing of dynamic potentials of Dalit movements in such alliances. Dalits end up competing within themselves and replicate the patronage-based politics that pervades the political culture. The MHA's power lies in reliance on non-party ideological mobilisation against injustices that Dalits face and uses international networks to help sustain such activism. How far MHA will be able to sustain its political autonomy and its alliance with NCP remains to be seen.

BSP attempts to reverse the patronage-based system of party politics in the most difficult context of Marathwada. Dalits along with others here are mobilised to achieve the objective of *our vote our rule* outside

the patronage of dominant parties through volunteerism. It also resorts to substantive politics where resources provided by ideologically disagreeing BSP candidates are put to use for consolidation of Bahujan ideology and politics. The call for independent Bahujan politics with Ambedkari leadership has attracted both Dalits and some non-Dalits towards BSP. The BSP's growth at a national level offers hope for the cadres of BSP who continue their activism as 'missionary' work to challenge mainstream politics and free Dalit politics and votes from *dadpan* (fear). One of the major shortcomings of BSP, however, is its one-dimensional agenda of struggle for political power, this limited focus is not best suited for the grassroots for Marathwada where gaining of political power seems a distant possibility and real issues facing Dalits continue to exist on a daily basis.

Finally, Kanshiram's critique of the Poona Pact that forced Ambedkar into accepting joint electorate (instead of separate) and reserved seats seems relevant not just for Dalits but various other marginalised castes as well in Marathwada. It is not just Dalits who are turned into symbols of self-representation serving dominant interests. The challenges faced by Dalit electoral politics point to the continued importance and relevance of non-political spaces in creating 'collective identities and cultures of protest'.

# 8

## Between High Democracy and Low Civility

### Why Dalits Need a Civil Society?

In April 2011, Anna<sup>1</sup> Hazare (a known Gandhian) was fasting in Delhi to protest the corrupt state and support a powerful citizens' Ombudsman (Lokpal) who could investigate and punish corrupt public servants and politicians. Hazare had threatened to fast till an Act was passed for Lokpal in the Parliament. This movement called itself civil society and most media and urban middle-classes rallied support. All the TV channels (both vernacular and English) were buzz with the news of 'civil society *against* corrupt state and politicians'.

Dalit groups on the other hand in Maharashtra mobilised against Hazare for his anti-Ambedkar and anti-Constitution stand and Hazare's refusal to respect Parliament. Mayawati too doubted the caste basis of Hazare's 'civil' society and questioned, 'Why Hazare's rhetoric of nationalism (Bharat mata and Gandhi) did not include Dr Ambedkar? And why was it so difficult to find a non-political (civil) Dalit to be a part of Hazare's movement?'

Anna Hazare, amongst the Dalit activist circles of Maharashtra is known as a village tyrant who does not allow elections and liquor (both are considered impure and corrupt) in his village, insists that Dalits become vegetarians and function from village temple. Dalits in Delhi

<sup>1</sup>Kisan Hazare is from Maratha caste in Maharashtra and is locally known as Anna (means father in Marathi).

too protested against anti-democratic and pro-Hindu symbols of Hazare movement. This impacted the Hazare group significantly which reflected in their rally of December 2011 in Mumbai. The stage in Mumbai was decorated with a huge background of the 'Constitution of India' and images of various leaders including Ambedkar. Dalit politics, thus, significantly challenged the cultural purities and intolerance of elite civil society and their modernity.

In India, the organisations and movements that claim to be *civil* mostly construct a form of *pure* modernity and civil society that celebrates high Hindu culture and nationalism. While state and democracy are objects of ridicule in urban elite mobilisations, Indian culture is largely seen to be corruption-free.

As we have seen in this book, the rural landscapes stage further a complex political terrain where fragmented institutions and processes of state alleviate traditional authority of dominant castes. Democracy and state are not objects of ridicule for rural dominants as they provide robust conditions for sustaining rural traditional power. Rural India, thus, has robust democracy where caste travels between civil society and state influencing both politics of control and change. Indignity for Dalits has, thus, come to be normative of rural democracy and politics. Not surprisingly, Indian democracy also tolerates violence in general, against Dalits in particular. Such violence is linked to India's political culture as, 'we have been trained to take intolerance for granted', suggests Kaviraj (2010: 96).

I have preferred to talk of this complex political condition as one of high democracy and low civility, where violence and democracy sync due to lack of civility in political culture. Rural India, thus, has a peculiar case of robust democracy and low civility when it comes to Dalits and Dalit politics is at odds with this complex merger that sustains Dalit exclusion. Dalits, thus, face many forms of 'uncivil violence'; they, however, are most committed to 'civil democracy' (Lynch 2001). This study of Dalit politics, therefore, has illuminated not merely what civil society 'is' but what civil society 'does'. Through an ethnography of Dalit politics, I have presented a nuanced picture of the ensuing politicisation of Dalits, their protests, daily civic engagement with caste inequalities and fractured institutions of state, processes of ideology building, formation of collective identities of protest and the intersections of Dalit politics with the state and international civil society actors. Dalit politics in many ways shapes the transformation of state, civil society and caste; it particularly causes a revolution in the realm of civility and civil relations.

In this concluding chapter, I argue therefore that civil society remains central in democratic processes, but the making of civil society and of civility in India is a complex process which does not fit into the normative prescriptions of liberals. The politics of Dalit movements present the vernacular processes of democratisation that include protests and violent manifestations as part of democratisation. Social transformation is, thus, not achieved through gift of a benevolent state or the product of elite self-reform as Gandhi envisaged but sustained struggles of lesser citizens like those of Dalits. These struggles set-up the complex condition of polity and democracy in India where violence and exclusion are normative and the possibility of civiltà and civil society are difficult.

### **Dalit Politics: Between High Democracy and Low Civility**

Civility as a key virtue of civil society helps in arriving at common good in liberal democracies, 'civility treats others as, at least, equal in dignity, never as inferior' (Shils 1991: 12). Civility is a key ingredient in linking the general culture of a people to their political culture (Pye 1999: 769). Challenges to universal and ideal practice of civility arise both from economic and non-economic factors. In the Indian context, caste privileges and power affect the possibilities of civility and trust across castes. Dalits as 'untouchables' are at the worst receiving end of incivilities of caste.

The liberal Constitution of India partially recognises the violent and exclusionary potentials of caste and envisages procedures for repairing civil relations and conduct affected by caste. In real practice however, neither the state nor non-caste collectives have been the locus of transforming caste and instilling civility amongst caste-privileged citizens. The violence and inequalities of caste have largely been made visible through politicisation of caste, more particularly through the politicisation of Dalits. Liberal approaches to civility believe in arriving at a common good through consensus building (Shils and Grosby 1997). Conflict or war is seen as return to the 'state of nature', therefore, antithetical to civil society. A focus on reaching consensus through deliberation, however, can mistake silenced voices for consensus, it may also ignore the mixing of traditional modes of authority with more modern ones. If consensus for a common good is believed to be the core of civil society, then caste relations which participants and activists of Dalit movements term slavery (for Dalits), too could be termed 'civil' as they would seem to be



operating with a political consensus. Dalit subjects even today in some villages of Marathwada operate in such consensus, embracing silence over daily exclusions they face—by not entering the temple, not contesting elections, not cultivating *gaairan*, not celebrating *jayanti* and by voting under compulsion. Dalit lower status thus sustains the privileged selfhood of dominants.

The moral impediment that liberals favour of deliberative procedures, politeness, rational communication and undoing of status privileges in the practice of civil society are not antithetical to the freedom of Dalits. The liberal procedures and institutions of civil society are crucial to unsettle the traditional modes of civility that construct Dalits as lesser subjects. These traditional modes of civility when merged with liberal democratic practices can reproduce Dalits as what Gorringer (2005) calls ‘untouchable’ citizens. I have argued in Chapter One that the colonial imposition of civil society (and civility) served as a political space of freedom and self-realisation for Dalits and its widening in postcolonial phase led to Dalit politics and associated political violence against Dalits. The processes of making society civil in postcolonial India are not merely a matter of politeness and deliberation but a political process involving extra-institutional mobilisation for reforming both the state and society. Dalit participation and assertion in public spaces violates local norms of civility and evoke violence.

## Violence, Alternative Civilities and Collective Identities

Dalit citizenship claims in colonial and postcolonial times point to the challenge of making civility possible in India. The making of civility across castes in India includes processes of both violence and democratic deliberations. Violence, thus, need not mark a return to ‘rude’ society or the ‘state of nature’. The real processes of the making of civility are demonstrated through violence that Dalits face and the Dalit response to such institutionalised violence.

After four Dalits were burnt to death by Kunbi-Marathas in September 2006 in Khairlanji village of Bhandara District, most cities in Maharashtra came to a standstill temporarily as Dalits indulged in violence damaging ‘public’ property, creating a situation of ‘anarchy’ for the elite middle classes. Khairlanji, except for the scale of violence and Dalit protest, offers in many ways a routine story of violation of Dalit bodies and

citizen status. The Dalit protest attracted national and international attention forcing the disinterested Maharashtra (Maratha) government into action. On 24 September 2008, a fast track court delivered its verdict including the death penalty for some of the accused. Dalit activists from Beed who participated in the protests and public damage did not consider the verdict satisfactory, as the court did not recognise the case as one of 'caste' atrocity.

The denial of caste violence against Dalits in liberal institutions despite procedural recognition sheds light on the merger of liberal politics with local exclusionary traditions. It also helps understand that civility cannot be introduced by state interventions and non-state socio-cultural practices are important. 'Religions do greatest service to civility when they preach not only love of neighbour but resistance to wrong', argues Carter (1998: 285). Dalit movements, therefore, are wary of Hinduism's role in the making of civility since it upholds caste and share a similar but lesser suspicion of the state.

Continued violent humiliations against Dalits are aimed at reminding Dalits of their 'outcast' status and point to the lack of civility in the local political culture and civil society. In cases of violence against Dalits, a sense of anarchy prevails in the village where the dominant castes undermine the political authority of the modern state. Dalit movements on the other hand, bring the state back in through violent demonstrations aimed at the state and simultaneous evocations of the Constitution against the tradition of caste violence, making liberal institutions important despite their shortcomings. Chapter four has particularly demonstrated the violence evoked by Dalit assertion and citizenship claims in public spaces. It is not just through violent performances that Dalits seek to establish civility in political relations, they also participate in elections and engage in formation of pragmatic alliances and alternative collective identities across caste that civilise polity and democratise civil society.

### ***Collective Identities of Protest and Substantive Electoral Politics***

Manisha, a senior women leader of MHA, a non-Dalit married to a Dalit activist enjoys much respect amongst Dalit women. In May 2009, she was nominated for the most-valued annual prize of Bhartiya Vidhyarthi Sena (Indian Students' Army, a social organisation of SS) as recognition for her activism. After some dilemma over accepting this award

she decided to receive it. In her short award acceptance speech, instead of emphasising the historical martial valour of Shivaji as a Hindu king and Savarkar as a saviour of Hindus, she reminded the twenty thousand strong youth participants in Mumbai about Phule, Shahu and Ambedkar and particularly their contribution to the 'democracy' in India. She also appreciated SS for condemning the Pindi violence in Beed. The SS's antipathy to Ambedkarite politics is well-known and the MHA activist did not receive the routine applause one generally expects in Dalit gatherings. The SS's compulsion of awarding their most prestigious award to an activist of MHA informs us of the dynamism that electoral politics and Dalit politics can bring to radical ideologies forcing them into civil conversations and positions.

As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, Dalit politics too contributes to substantialisation of caste. However, such substantialisation of caste varies from caste mobilisation in dominant parties, where hierarchies of caste remain least challenged. Caste is, thus, turned into impenetrable modern blocks to sustain intolerance towards non-Hindus and Dalit assertive politics. Politics pursued by BSP and MHA does not fit into Schmitt's (2007) friend-foe<sup>2</sup> distinction. The objective of Dalit politics is not elimination of those oppressing them; it rather stretches the imagination of civil relations and civility of their opponents. Dalit politics has deepened and caused expansion of civil spaces and the state has continued to be at the core of Dalit politics.

I have elaborated on the dynamism of caste and its innovative uses in Dalit politics in influencing public opinion and forging collective identities of protest. In doing so, Dalit politics opposes the hierarchic and exclusionary traditions of caste and imaginatively reconstructs alternative identities towards Dalit liberation. The case of MHA presented Ambedkarisation beyond Mahars and the making of *swabhimani* Mangs whereas BSP's politics and the making of Bahujan exemplified mobilisation beyond the Dalit category. This presents the ideological persuasion by Mahars of non-Mahar Dalits and of non-Dalits by Dalits in enlarging the scope of Dalit politics and ideology. Assertive Dalit participation in electoral politics stages distrust of Dalits not in party politics or political representatives but their failure to recognise caste inequality and Dalit issues. While Dalit movements, as shown in Chapter Seven, are partially affected

<sup>2</sup>Schmitt points to the contradiction between liberal parliamentarism and democracy, for him, the politics is essentially conflictual resulting in a friend-foe contradiction and annihilation of liberal parliamentarism (Scheuerman 1995).

by the patronage culture that prevails in the political culture, they also attempt to reverse the domination of dominant castes and ideologies that make caste invisible and Dalits docile.

A liberal notion of equality and inequality with individual at its centre overpowers the real inequalities that caste constructs in India's civil society. Similar can be the oversights of understanding the state as a monolithic and oppressive neo-liberal unit. Approaches with focus only on political economy ignore nuanced processes of the constitution of a modern caste-subject. They may also ignore the potential of caste as a problem and as a solution for the making of civility in India.

Further globalisation cannot be reduced to growth of neo-liberalism/imperialism as globalisation has also opened newer spaces for Dalit politics at grassroots. Global power does not operate as a 'well-oiled machine' and there is 'friction' at various levels through which hegemony can be 'made and unmade' (Tsing 2005: 6). Chapter Three has outlined the loosening of caste associated labour practices that affected Dalit mobility. My primary concern, however, has been with transformation of public spaces and Dalit politics under globalisation. The intersections of the state and dominant caste interests contribute to the local unequal public realm. Dalits though subordinate have continued protest politics in Marathwada. Chapter Four has particularly exemplified the workings of the globalised grassroots in Marathwada through the intersections of I/NGOs and Dalit politics, to argue against simplistic accounts that emphasise the ill effects of I/NGOs on politics in general and Dalit politics in particular. Intersections of Dalit politics with international civil society is coupled with Dalit politics revolving around the state. This suggests that radical transformations in society can be undertaken through engaging the (capitalist?) state and its hegemonic civil society. For instance, the practice of 'untouchability' was made an offence by the modern postcolonial state. This 'political' decision in the Constitution went against the ethics of rural society where practice of untouchability continued to remain at the heart of caste *doxa*. The citizenship interests of Dalits are persistently in tension with ethical and moral interests of rural dominants.

Civil society and civility are not merely related to property and capital and incivilities can be manufactured by non-economic factors too (Alexander 2006). The refeudalisation of civil society through market forces and rising consumption culture that worries Habermas (1991) is considered 'less dangerous' (Awad's phrase) for Dalits who engage in the task of 'defeudalising' local liberal practices that resurrect Dalit

exclusion. The incivilities generated by caste have partially invented the current paradox of low civility and high democracy in India's politics. Parliamentary democracy in India is thus functioning without respect for principles of civility.

## **Caste, Dalit Politics and the Making of Civility**

A clear distinction between state and community is difficult to forge in India and also to distinguish the 'state' from 'political society' (Hansen 2001: 233). The distinction between civil society as ideal and political society as substantive (Chatterjee 2004), refutes not only the intersections of civil and political but also subaltern aspirations to civility and civil society. In the case of Dalits, the virtue of civility has much to offer due to dynamic incivilities generated by caste. Incivility in terms of denying equal status to some individuals/groups and authority of civil institutions such as courts, media, etc., exists in all cultures. These may continue to reinvent themselves according to changing politics. The promise of civility and civil society lies not in etiquettes of politeness but in the possibility of transforming civil relations and state through politics of ideology. The Hindutva mobilisation in India too fits within Chatterjee's (2004) conception of political society because of its reliance on non-civil means. The ideals of Ambedkarite ideology and Dalit politics on the other hand, merge 'protest' politics with 'civil' discourses (Constitution) of equality.

Dalit politics does not contradict possibilities of civil society, it rather strengthens civil society and the state institutions, the modes by which they affect such developments, however, do not fit into liberal modes. Dalit politics, despite not following the liberal terrain, works towards politics of civility where the Constitution too becomes a cultural and political symbol of protest. These innovative symbols of dignity claims travel deep amongst Dalits to the mud walls of Dalit homes, which are decorated with framed pictures of Ambedkar.

The intersections of ideology, interests and identity in Dalit mobilisation leave Dalit politics in a state of pendulum swinging between the substantial (interest and identity) and ideological (anti-caste collectives). My research reaffirms that the state, civil society and caste are not static, homogeneous and absolute systems and that the state and its liberal tenets do not always work against Dalits. Besides their intersections and

coevolution of the state, caste and civil society, they are also malleable to the influence of the most marginalised groups like Dalits.

Dalit politics in Maharashtra, in the post-Panther phase, represents a cacophony of voices that compete and cooperate in the practice of Ambedkarite politics. The stigmatised bodies and existence of Dalits in insidious forms construct collective trauma and collective identities of Dalits. Caste, therefore, forms the core of anti-caste struggles that Dalit activists engage in. Dalit politics has unquestionably changed the local norms of civility and has partially challenged discriminatory elements of society. The ideal of political equality generated by civil society is infectious and has led to growth of Dalit politics. Like the project of civil society, Dalit politics is an ongoing project. The dynamism of Dalit politics and its critical role makes it indispensable in the cultural process of democratisation. Dalit politics engages in what Alexander (2006) calls 'civil repair', thus contributing to the continuing process of reforming the state, society and making society civil.

## Glossary

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>Aani-baani</i>     | Marathi term for state of emergency in India between 1975–1977.   |
| Atishudra             | Refers to untouchable castes that are classed as outside of the varna, therefore, ‘untouchable’.  |
| Babasaheb             | Ambedkar is also referred to as Babasaheb as a sign of respect amongst Dalits.  |
| Bahujan               | Literally means ‘majority’. As an ideological construct, Bahujan refers to organising the lower castes that constitute a majority into a political community. |
| Bajra                 | Pearl millet, also referred to as <i>bajri</i> in Marathi.  |
| Bauddha               | Mahars who have converted to Buddhism are also referred to as Bauddha.  |
| <i>Bhakar/bhakri</i>  | Flattened bread made out of jowar or bajra.   |
| Chambar               | The third most numerical ex-untouchable caste in Maharashtra whose caste occupation was shoe-making and leather work.   |
| Charmakar             | Sanskritised name for the word Chambhar.  |
| Dhangar               | Shepherd caste.   |
| <i>Gairan</i>         | <i>Gai</i> literally meant cow and <i>ran</i> means land. The grazing lands attached to villages are referred to as <i>gairan</i> in Marathwada.              |
| <i>Gaav</i>           | Village.  |
| <i>Gavaki</i>         | Village duties of Mahars.   |
| Girdhawar             | Circle (comprising few villages) revenue inspector.   |
| <i>Gram panchayat</i> | The decentralised governance structure in Maharashtra is a three-tier system with zilla   |

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
|                   | parishad at district level, panchayat samiti at block/taluka level and <i>gram panchayat</i> at the village level.   |
| <i>Jai Bhim</i>   | Means victory to Ambedkar and followers of Ambedkar prefer to greet each other with <i>Jai Bhim</i> instead of the Hindu ways of greeting such as <i>Ram Ram</i> .   |
| Jat(i)            | Caste.   |
| <i>Jatiwad(i)</i> | Casteism or communalism.   |
| <i>Jayanti</i>    | Birth anniversary, <i>jayanti</i> is used to refer to annual birthday celebrations of political and socio-religious leaders.   |
| Jwaree/Jowar      | Indian variety of sorghum and an important cereal for rural poor.  |
| <i>Karan</i>      | A <i>karan</i> refers to a religious event of sacrificing animals (buffaloes or goats) which friends and relatives feast on. A <i>potraj</i> is called to make this sacrifice in the case of goddess <i>Mari-aai</i> . A <i>karan</i> of <i>Mari-aai</i> can also be done by the village Patil if he offers the <i>halya</i> (male buffalo). <i>Karan</i> is generally done to ask for a <i>navas</i> (specific blessings) from gods or to return the blessings that goddess has extended. |
| Khairlanj         | A village in Bhandara District of Maharashtra. In September 2006, four members of a Dalit family were murdered in this village by the Kunbi-Marathas.  |
| Kunbi             | A peasant/cultivator caste considered as lower subcaste of the Maratha caste.  |
| Lok Sabha         | House of the People, members of which are directly elected.  |
| <i>Mahapurush</i> | Literally means great men. A term used in Dalit movements to refer to 'great men' who challenged indignities of caste.   |
| Mahar             | The most numerous ex-untouchable caste in Maharashtra and ranked lower than the Chambaras in caste hierarchy.  |
| Maharuda/Manguda  | Dalit localities, places where Mangs and Mahars live.  |



|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Mang                               | The second most numerous ex-untouchable caste in Maharashtra after the Mahars. Mangs are ranked lower than the Mahars and Chambars.  |
| Mari-aai                           | In Maharashtra, <i>Mari-aai</i> or <i>Laxmi-aai</i> are symbolic of the virgin village goddesses.  |
| <i>Namantar</i> /Namantar movement | <i>Namantar</i> means changing of name. The terms are associated with Dalit mobilisation that ensued from late 1970s till mid- 1990s in Maharashtra to rename Marathwada University. |
| Panchayat Samiti                   | See <i>gram panchayat</i> .  |
| Parishad                           | Meeting/conference.  |
| <i>Parit</i>                       | Washerman.   |
| Patil                              | Village headman who generally came from Maratha caste.   |
| <i>Potraj</i>                      | <i>Apotraj</i> generally belongs to Mahar or Mang caste and is the worshipper of <i>Mari-aai</i> .   |
| Rajya Sabha                        | Council of States, member of this council are elected by through the representatives of state legislative assemblies.  |
| <i>Samaj</i>                       | A term variedly used in to refer to social groupings such as caste or collective identities such as Dalit or Bahujan.  |
| Sarpanch                           | Chairman of village panchayat.   |
| Satyagraha                         | Peaceful modes of protest.   |
| <i>Savarnas</i>                    | Caste Hindus. The term is also used as a synonym for Marathas by Dalits in Marathwada.   |
| Shudra                             | Shudra is the fourth and lower varna and castes under Shudra varna are considered ritually impure.   |
| Talathi                            | Village revenue inspector.   |
| Taluka                             | Also referred to as block/tehsil, is an administrative unit in a district.   |
| Tahsildar/Tehsildar                | Block/taluka revenue officer.  |
| Teli                               | Oil pressing caste.  |
| Valmiki                            | Sweepers or cleaners (also referred to as <i>Bhangi</i> )  |

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Vanjari                 | Identified as OBC in Maharashtra is ranked lower than the Marathas in Maharashtra.                  |
| <i>Veth begar</i>       | Extracting forced labour related to caste, was practiced in Marathwada region.                      |
| <i>Vichar/vaicharik</i> | Literally means thoughts/ideas, was used in the movements to refer to ideology.                     |
| Vidhan Sabha            | State Legislative Assembly.   |
| <i>Yeskarki</i>         | Caste duties of the Mahars such as cleaning village streets and removing carcasses of dead animals. |
| Zilla Parishad          | See <i>gram panchayat</i> .   |

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